

A LIFE WORTHY OF BEING LIVED: DIALECTICS IN

SVEVO AND MICHELSTAEDTER

by

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**Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts
at the University of Stellenbosch**

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February 1991

DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.

SUMMARY

The aim of this study is to point out and elaborate the affinities, culturally as well as textually, between the two Italian authors, Italo Svevo and Carlo Michelstaedter. Furthermore, it is the object of this study to demonstrate how, implicitly, the two authors provide an answer, each in his own way, to the question of "una vita degna di essere vissuta" - "a life worthy of being lived". The central theme in this regard concerns the distinctive notions that each author has in respect of "health" and "disease", and "life" and "death", as well as how these notions correspond to the implicit search in their respective writings for "perfection", "authenticity" and "liberty".

OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie het ten doel om die kulturele en tekstuele affiniteite tussen die twee Italiaanse outeurs, Italo Svevo en Carlo Michelstaedter, uit te wys en uitvoerig te bespreek. Daarbenewens, is die voorneme van hierdie studie om te wys hoe elk van die twee outeurs, implisiet, 'n antwoord verskaf op die kwessie van "una vita degna di essere vissuta" - " 'n lewe wat waardig is om geleef te word". Die sentrale tema in hierdie verband het betrekking op die onderskeidelike opvattinge wat elke outeur se werk bevat ten opsigte van "gesondheid" en "siekte", en "lewe" en "dood". Daar word ook getoon hoe hierdie opvattinge betreffende die implisiete soeke ten opsigte van "volmaaktheid", "outentisiteit" en "vryheid" in hul onderskeidelike tekste korrespondeer.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I should like to thank Professor L. J. Kabat for his tireless patience and guidance, and inspiration, during the long period of study, writing and refinement that the completion of this project has required. His infinite patience, and the discipline he instilled in me, have made this project the learning experience that it has been.

Furthermore, I should like to thank the Italian Government, and in particular the Italian Embassy in Cape Town, for the scholarship they awarded to me enabling me to frequent the University of Siena and to follow courses in Italian literature as well as to complete the necessary research for this thesis. In particular, I should also like to thank Professors Antonio Prete, Romano Luperini, Franco Fortini, Sergio Campailla and Maryse Jeuland-Meynaud for the valuable insight they gave me, in conversation and formally, during my period of study in Italy. I also wish to make specific mention of Signorina Antonella Galarotti of the Fondo Carlo Michelstaedter in Gorizia for her generous assistance in providing me with research material and photographs.

In addition, I should like to express my gratitude to the University of Stellenbosch for the financial assistance they gave me in the form of a bursary at the inception of this project.

I should also like to thank Dr Jörg Hennig and the Martini di Cigala family of San Giusto di Rentennano for providing me with a home during my sojourn in Italy.

I reserve a very special word of thanks for my family and in particular my father for his financial assistance, my late aunt Garda Wypkema who made the journey to Gorizia possible, and my uncle Mr O. C. H. Krause.

There is one person whose ceaseless patience and superhuman powers of endurance deserve mention: I should like to thank Jenny Ellis, without whom this project would never have been realised in final form.

There are many other individuals, too numerous to name, whom I could have mentioned, but they know who they are and to them I say thank you.

Any errors or mistakes contained herein are entirely my own.

CONTENTS

	Page:
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE	4
CHAPTER TWO	22
CHAPTER THREE	55
CHAPTER FOUR	79
CONCLUSION	105
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY:	
Primary Sources	114
Secondary Sources	115
Tertiary Sources	118

VI



ITALO SVEVO (1861 - 1928)



INTRODUCTION

A comparative study of Carlo Michelstaedter and Italo Svevo inevitably must result in a distinctive interpretation. A wide variety of interpretations of both authors' works exists.

Foundations of interpretation can certainly vary, but any study of necessity must establish its own foundations. The present study does not attempt to be comprehensive. It is an attempt to bring to light similarities and disparities as well as an attempt to illustrate the way in which both writers illumine each others' works.*

Michelstaedter was primarily a philosopher and a poet; Svevo essentially a novelist. But the fact that the two expressed their respective views in diverse genres and disciplines, does not in the least preclude a comparison of their works. Besides the compelling nature of both writers' works, both Svevo and Michelstaedter have similar backgrounds and ideas which overlap. The major point of contact or mutuality is that they both reach a central and conspicuous conclusion, namely, the concept of perfection arrived at through destruction. Yet, each having identified the same areas of speculation, arrives at this conclusion in strikingly distinctive and diverse manner. It is the object of this essay to explore these two

*At the centenary conference commemorating the birth of Michelstaedter, held at Gorizia in October 1987, a paper was delivered by Giuseppe Antonio Camerino entitled: "L'impossibile cura della vita e della società: Affinità di Michelstaedter con Svevo e la cultura asburgica." This paper, to the best of my knowledge not yet published, as well as Gian Paolo Biasin's treatment of the affinities between Michelstaedter and Svevo in his book Literary Diseases and Piero Pieri's very recent publication La scienza del tragico: Saggio su Carlo Michelstaedter, constitute the only three major attempts at linking these two specific writers. The thrust of the present essay, however, differs from the treatment given to the two writers by Biasin, Camerino and Pieri although their contributions are indeed important and useful to the discussion herein. Pieri's book published in 1989, comes the closest in spirit to the present study. The reader may consult the present bibliography herewith appended.

venues which pursue patently dissimilar modes of investigation and approach, but both of which, this notwithstanding, arrive at a peculiar consonance.

Notwithstanding so much else that can be said about Michelstaedter and Svevo in terms of their respective ideas and writings and their singular contribution to Italian letters and philosophy, the present discussion shall focus in particular on their preoccupation with "perfection", "authenticity" and "liberty". These three concepts are critical, indeed unavoidable, in any attempt to answer a vital question which is implicitly posed by both these writers, each in his own way. And that question, succinctly stated, is that of "una vita degna di essere vissuta".* As we shall see, in Svevo we have an ironic play on the concepts of "salute/malattia" which concepts significantly correspond to Michelstaedter's "vita/morte". And we shall attempt to elucidate the greater extremism of Michelstaedter's points of departure.

Our discussion concerning "perfection", "authenticity" and "liberty", requires in turn an examination of the notion of "sapere" in Michelstaedter and that of "psychoanalysis" in Svevo. Further, and more specifically, proper comprehension of the theme of "perfection" requires, *inter alia*, an investigation of the Darwinian elements in Svevo's thinking as well as an investigation of those elements reflective of Nietzsche's and Schopenhauer's influence in Michelstaedter's thinking. The themes of "authenticity" and "liberty" are necessarily closely linked, since the former as we hope to demonstrate is a prerequisite of the latter. This will become clearer as the present essay proceeds, as so too will the significance of the terms "vita/morte" and "salute/malattia". Inevitably, this portion of the discussion will centre on selected aspects of existentialism, the authenticity of Being, absolutism on the part of

* This phrase has been used by Enrico Ghidetti, in his study : Italo Svevo : La coscienza di un borghese triestino(see present bibliography). However, it should be noted that he employs the phrase with an intent and significance different from that adopted in the present study.

Michelstaedter, and resignation on the part of Svevo. The strongly pronounced motifs of renewal in both Michelstaedter and Svevo, and humour in Svevo, specifically, will also be objects of our attention.

In Chapter One, an overview will be given as to their specific cultural and historical backgrounds and this will be expanded in Chapter Two, with the emphasis being on how their cultural milieu influenced the nature of their works. The themes of health and disease, life and death, will be discussed as well as their significance in terms of perfection, authenticity and liberty. The notions of perfection, authenticity and liberty will be further expanded upon in the Chapter Three and we shall begin to see more clearly the divergences in Michelstaedter's and Svevo's ideas as well as the significant correspondence in their ideas. In Chapter Four we shall see how their respective ideas, not only illumine each others' works, but how each of the two authors answer the implicit question of "una vita degna di essere vissuta" - "a life worthy of being lived".

CHAPTER ONE

"L'importante non è guarire - bensì vivere con i propri mali . . ." ¹

[The important thing is not to be cured, but to live with one's own maladies . . .]*

The first thing one notes about both Italo Svevo and Carlo Michelstaedter is that they shared the same cultural and historical milieu, at least to a significant extent. They were both Jewish; both were resident in that part of Italy which, at the turn of the century, was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; and both elected to write in Italian, although both were exposed in no small measure to German culture. Moreover although both appertained to the bourgeoisie, neither, in his respective thought and ideas, espoused or adhered to norms and conventional mental paradigms of the middle class.

Svevo was born in Trieste in 1861 and lived there for the greater part of his life. Trieste was a commercial city, the main port of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a city shared by Italians, Germans and Slovenes. It was decidedly a "Mittel-European" city, like Budapest and Prague, and like these cities, was within the political orbit of Vienna. Culturally, however, Trieste looked towards Italy, and the city's political aspirations clearly bespoke a gravitation towards, and a quest for ultimate unification with that nation. In fact Svevo himself was politically active in the quest for redemption of *Italia Irredenta* "Italy Unredeemed".

Gorizia, on the other hand, where Michelstaedter was born on 10 October 1887, was a

*All translations appearing henceforth are my own, unless otherwise indicated and are contained within brackets.

provincial town where Michelstaedter's father, Alberto, worked for an insurance company. Corizia did not have the urbane and relative sophistication of Trieste. Moreover, Michelstaedter's exposure to the harsher realities of a large city, as well as to its sophistication, was inevitably limited during his formative years. But it is here that we must note at once one or two biographical facts critical in any valid comparison of the two men's works, and vital, indeed crucial, to the present study.

Michelstaedter died by his own hand when he was 23. Svevo died in an car accident when he was well into his sixties. This fact makes the comparison all the more significant in that the similarity of philosophical views and conclusions were arrived at, on the one hand, by Michelstaedter, a much younger man, and by Svevo, on the other hand, a man old enough to have been Michelstaedter's father. Yet it should be noted immediately that undue stress should not be placed on a comparison of their "external" biographies *per se*. Rather, the cultural influences which influences strongly affected the respective thought of these men should be revealed and emphasised.

Michelstaedter obviously had a much shorter and consequently more "concentrated" experience of life, so to speak. The two men were thus at antipodal stages of life when their major works were written. La coscienza di Zeno was written when Svevo was in advanced middle age, and Michelstaedter's La persuasione e la rettorica was completed shortly before the author's suicide in 1910. La coscienza di Zeno was published shortly after the First World War, in 1923, after a period of almost twenty years of literary inactivity, this inactivity being traceable to the lack of success of Svevo's first two novels Senilità (As a Man Grows Older) and Una vita (A Life).

A key premise to bear in mind is the following:

"L'uomo adulto è diverso dal giovane perché prende il mondo com'è, invece di rappresentarlo sempre nella peggior luce possibile e di volerlo migliorare, cioè modellare sul proprio ideale; nell'uomo adulto si consolida l'opinione che nel mondo bisogna seguire il proprio *interesse*, non i propri ideali." [Stresses Stirner's]²

[A mature man is different from the young man because he takes the world as it is, rather than representing it always in the worst possible light and wanting to improve it, that is, to modelling it upon his own ideal. In the mature man the opinion that in the world it is necessary to follow one's own *interests* and not one's own ideals is consolidated.]

This immediately sheds light upon the present study, in that Svevo, "l'uomo adulto", does observe life through his protagonist Zeno, with a consequent detachment which is markedly absent in Michelstaedter. Svevo does "... prende[ere] il mondo com'è" - "... take the world as it is". He does not endeavour to change it, nor does he moralise. He describes, he observes, he depicts. Obviously, Svevo does have strong opinions which we shall examine in more detail at a later stage. Michelstaedter, on the other hand, (and as we shall see later), wants to change the world and presents the world "nella peggior luce possibile" - "in the worst possible light".

In this regard, it is essential to observe that Svevo as a novelist has of course, a much more subtle and malleable "tool" at his disposal. That is to say, Zeno is his "creation" and as such is able to function, as it were, as Svevo's *persona* or "proxy". Svevo, (the writer's *nom de plume*), born Ettore Schmitz, commits himself his own personal preoccupation to the text only indirectly to the text. Michelstaedter, on the other hand, employs no *persona* or "proxy", but expresses unequivocally and directly on the page his unfiltered thoughts and his own intimate dilemma. Michelstaedter, as mentioned, is primarily a philosopher and a poet. His La persuasione e la rettorica is a highly personalised, indeed "self-expository" philosophical account, based on an intimate knowledge of the pre-Socratic philosophers' works. It attempts to show the way to authenticity which is an essential phase in becoming a "uomo della persuasione" or a "man of conviction". Simultaneously he defines and

illustrates the lack of authenticity which lack is a manifest and invariable characteristic of the "uomo della rettorica", the "man of rhetoric". Authenticity of Being is the crux of Michelstaedter's view of life, and he maintains that liberty and perfection are attainable.³ As far as his poetry is concerned, much of it is thematically linked to his philosophical stance. Yet, though poetry is an exceedingly subtle and malleable mode of artistic expression, it is generally far more concentrated, synthesized and distilled in terms of exposition, than the more protracted mode of the novel. And in Michelstaedter's case, his poetry certainly does not approach epic proportions.

Thus the distinction which exists between Svevo's and Michelstaedter's respective choices of genre, is of singular importance because it is that very distinction which determines the manner in which each author reveals himself to the reader. The mode or form of expression which each author employs, is attuned to, and in consonance with the substance of his thought. To illustrate, Michelstaedter's work, *La persuasione e la rettorica*, is prescriptive, almost didactic. In it, Michelstaedter is "addressing" his reader, so to speak, what in his view is right and what in his view is wrong. It is strongly characterised by tendentiousness. This aspect of his work is in accord with his youthful nature in that he wishes to improve the world and human nature as well. Not only does Michelstaedter want to improve the world and man but indeed, he desires to remake or refashion them. However, in order to do this, he presents us with what initially appears to be a paradox, indeed a seeming contradiction.

That is to say, Michelstaedter utterly rejects the world and man, even in their most intimate, profound and normally assumed manifestations. This rejection on his part, is a necessity, a *sine qua non* for the realisation, or actuation of his vision of the ideal man in an ideal world. More simply put, the slate must first be wiped clean before a larger and more profound message can be written upon it. For example, he rejects the notion of human love

being a panacea for all ills; he denies that knowledge as such is valid and objective; and he opposes the general assumption that social structures, such as family and religion, have any intrinsic worth. He rejects what he apprehends as being a central weakness in human nature:

"Gli uomini vivono per vivere, per non morire."⁴

[Men live in order to live, in order not to die.]

In effect he is saying that men live merely because they fear dying. Their living is not a conscious act of volition. Rather, it is merely the continuance of life, a continuance endured and engendered by man's weakness or incapacity to face the ultimate and undesirable truths of human existence. "La loro persuasione è la paura della morte".⁵ - "Their motivation is fear of death". Michelstaedter does counterbalance this rigidly and moralistically categorical attitude with a call for renewal, as we shall see below. For the moment, however, let us return to the cultural milieu which for both writers was predominantly bourgeois and Jewish.

"Singolari le vicende del Territorio goriziano-triestino dall'eclissi nell'800 di Gorizia, capitale della contea di Gorizia e Gradisca, città fin'[sic]ora vivace nel Friuli tedesco, alla caotica progressione di attività di Trieste, emporio asburgico - più o meno nello stesso periodo. Singolare il fiorire di alcuni personaggi di grande rilievo nel mondo della cultura e delle arti e, fatto più eccezionale, tutti ebrei."⁶

[The vicissitudes of the Gorizian-Triestine Territory were singular following the eclipse of Gorizia in the 19th Century. Gorizia was the capital of the County of Gorizia and Gradisca. Gorizia had heretofore been a vivacious city in German Friuli. Its eclipse was caused by the chaotic progression, more or less in the same period, of the activities of Trieste, an Hapsburgian emporium. The flourishing of certain people of great significance in the world of culture and the arts was singular. And, a fact more exceptional yet, was that they were all Jewish.]

The essential element to bear in mind is that both Michelstaedter and Svevo were "scrittori di frontiera" - "frontier writers". They wrote in Italian even though they lived in that part of

Italian Europe which, politically, was not under Italian suzerainty. They were also familiar with the German-speaking world, and inevitably so. Yet their aspirations were Italian politically, (especially in the case of Svevo), and more importantly, culturally. There are reasons for this:

"... Trieste ... [era] ... città in cui la comunità israelitica costituiva il nerbo più forte della corrente legata all'Italia e alla sua cultura."⁷

[... Trieste ... [was] ... a city in which the Jewish community constituted the strongest element of the movement which was linked to Italy and its culture.]

This statement emphasises the difference between being Jewish in Trieste and being Jewish in Vienna. In the light of the following observation by Sigmund Freud, a resident of Vienna, it is not surprising that the Jewish community of Trieste, given its proximity to Italy, wanted to be Italian rather than Austrian.

"Anzitutto mi feriva l'idea che per il fatto di essere ebreo dovessi sentirmi inferiore e straniero rispetto agli altri. Non accettavo assolutamente l'idea d'inferiorità. Non ho mai potuto capire perché avrei dovuto vergognarmi della mia origine, o, come già si cominciava a dire, della mia razza."⁸

[Above all, I was wounded by the idea that by virtue of the fact of being Jewish, I was obliged to feel inferior and a foreigner in respect of others. I absolutely did not accept the idea of inferiority. I have never been able to understand why I should have had to feel ashamed of my origins, or, as they were beginning to call it at that time, of my "race".]

Thus, Svevo and Michelstaedter stood apart from the larger, surrounding society, not only by virtue of their particular sensibilities and their cultural affinities, but also by virtue of their Jewishness. Yet this was probably less marked in their case than in Freud's inasmuch as they resided in a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire which was obviously less German than Vienna, the capital.

"Nati dunque borghesi nel senso degli acquisiti privilegi dei mezzi finanziari . . . gli scrittori i pittori gli uomini di cultura ebrei del Territorio mai o quasi mai ebbero autentiche crisi di identità sociale."⁹

[Thus being born bourgeois in the sense of privileges acquired through financial means . . . the writers, the artists, the Jewish men of culture in the Territory never, or hardly ever, had authentic crises of social identity.]

Indeed, being Jewish in other parts of the Empire was a more oppressive experience. In the Italian part of the Empire, this was the case to a much lesser extent. This has been expressed more fully:

"Furono dunque il benessere acquisito, la quasi certezza di non apparire 'diversi', l'essere ovviamente accolti nella borghesia francoguisepina, a togliere all'ebreo del Territorio, all'artista ebreo del Territorio quell'aura di a volte amara a volte diabolica follia che pervade tante pagine da Mendele a Roth . . . E allora l'umorismo e l'autoironia dell'ebreo Svevo . . . "¹⁰

[It was thus the acquired well-being, the virtual certainty of not appearing to be 'different', being obviously welcomed into the Hapsburgian bourgeoisie, which divested the Jew of the Territory and the artist of the Territory, of that aura of madness, at times bitter, at times diabolic which pervades so many pages from Mendele to Roth . . . And hence the humour and self-irony of the Jew, Svevo . . .]

But both Svevo and Michelstaedter had in common an ambiguous identity, and it is therefore not surprising that Italy and the Italian language were means of opening new horizons, relatively removed from the restrictions such as those intimately felt and forcefully described by Freud. Yet that ambiguous identity, viz., their being Jewish obviously was to bear thematic implications in their respective works.

Another important element in considering the background of the two writers, is the fact that they were both essentially 20th Century writers. In saying this, one is not merely stating the obvious. Their cultural formation was that of the 19th Century. Svevo was profoundly influenced in his writing by Schopenhauer and Darwin; Michelstaedter by Nietzsche and

Ibsen, together with, of course, the pre-Socratic philosophers. It is pertinent to bear in mind how the 19th Century writers profoundly influenced the subsequent century, and laid the foundations of much of that which was to be expressed in our century. In fact, they determined much of the cultural mood of our times, exacerbated and convoluted as the era has been by cataclysmic events such as the First World War, the accompanying disruption of the social order, the burgeoning materialism and technological advances and the ensuing ethical disorientation, to mention but a few. Michelstaedter lived only ten years into the this century, yet much of what he says is not only prophetic in terms of 20th Century thought, but is also symptomatic of a civilisation in an advanced state of decay and confusion, as indeed, he perceived it to be.

Svevo had the dubious "advantage" of living a further twenty eight years into the 20th century. This allowed him, given his greater personal maturity as well, to become intimately acquainted with Freud's works and to bear witness, albeit indirectly, to the greatest holocaust which had theretofore befallen Western Civilisation in the form of the First World War.

What is most significant here from a thematic point of view, is Svevo's sense of humour. This is what distinguishes Svevo from many other Jewish writers in the Austro-Hungarian Empire such as Kafka, Arthur Schnitzler, Stefan Zweig and Joseph Roth. Surely, he shares with them the radical insight and thinking that they display, though the less oppressive social milieu in which he lived, most probably facilitated a less painful objectivity on his part. This in turn provided greater latitude within which a sense of humour could find expression and flourish in a literary as well as a non-literary context.

However, this assumes a noticeably different hue with Michelstaedter, of whom the following has been said in respect of the question of Jewishness or Ebraismo and humour.

"C'era nel goriziano [i.e., Michelstaedter] una labilità della psiche che si accompagnava da ultimo dissidio col padre Alberto Michelstaedter, israelita, che tuttavia si era costruito con tenacia la figura del notabile di una piccola città, ligio all'ordinamento sociale imperante ma implicato in quei segnali irredentistici che dovevano offrire ad alcuni ebrei del Territorio - tale fu il caso di Svevo per esempio - l'occasione di togliersi di dosso un 'Judentum' derivato dalla storia e dal costume."¹¹

[There was in the Gorizian [Michelstaedter] a weakness of the psyche which was coupled to his last dispute with his father, Alberto Michelstaedter, a Jew, who, nevertheless had with tenacity constructed for himself the image of a small-town notable faithful to the prevailing social order, but implicated in those irredentist signals were bound to offer certain Jews of the Territory - such was the case with Svevo, for example for example - the occasion to rid themselves of a "Judentum" derived from history and mores.]

Thus we see that the fact of aligning themselves with Italian political sympathies, resulted in Jews becoming more acceptable to others and implicitly, therefore, to themselves. This enabled to divest themselves significantly of an acute awareness of being Jewish. As we have mentioned, Michelstaedter and Svevo, being Jews, both, by virtue of geographical and social circumstances, were relatively immune from that traditional prejudice so prevalent elsewhere in the Empire. The fact that Michelstaedter does not display a sense of humour in his works and is clearly a more intense individual, can be ascribed to other factors of a more intimate and personal nature. At this stage a major emotional and psychological difference between Svevo and Michelstaedter becomes apparent. The young Michelstaedter would appear to be much more intensely aware of his assimilation. Yet, as we shall see more clearly below there was a paradox inherent in his inability to cope with that assimilation.

Ferruccio Fölkel points out the "means" by which Jews became assimilated into the Italian Hapsburgian bourgeoisie. He stresses - and this is indeed a cardinal point when considering how being Jewish influenced the content of Austrian and Italian Jewish writers' works - that their anti-historicism, was the principle instrument by which they "coped" culturally and intellectually. By their "anti-historicism" we intend a self-imposed, though obviously

imperfect, divestment of a Christian heritage which they viewed as being the source, the preponderant influence, generating that particular prejudice and discrimination manifested against Jews by a dominant surrounding culture. These Jewish writers sought to retrace and recall, (not necessarily consciously, and in a sense atavistically), man's own pre-Christian origins. This investigation on their part did not confine itself, or even include, exclusively Judaic sources. Svevo found fertile ground in Darwinian theories of human evolution, and Michelstaedter found auspicious exploration in the pre-Socratic philosophies of Ancient Greece. Sergio Campailla expands yet further the concept of anti-historicism:

"L'antistoricismo è rifiuto morale di una realtà dominata dall'etica mondana del denaro e del successo, in cui le istituzioni svuotano di senso il valore che invece dovrebbero preservare e in cui i padri si offrono come testimoni inattendibili, increduli, passivi. Alle nuove generazioni si pare una duplice strada: o quella di rompere definitivamente con la tradizione (ma questa scelta priva completamente di energie, e non dà nulla in cambio), o riassumere con rinnovato fervore, con originaria passione quel patrimonio culturale-religioso dissipatosi nel tempo."¹²

[Anti-historicism is the moral rejection of a reality dominated by the mundane ethics of money and success, in which institutions deprive of value of sense which instead they ought to preserve and in which the fathers offer themselves as unreliable, incredulous, passive witnesses. To the new generations, there appears a choice between two ways: either that of making a definitive break with tradition,- (but this choice is completely devoid of energies and gives nothing in exchange),- or reassuming with renewed fervour, with original passion, that cultural-religious patrimony which has dissipated itself in the passage of time.]

It would seem that Michelstaedter and Svevo chose the second alternative, Michelstaedter possibly more so, in that in his extremism, he uses the cultural patrimony of the Greeks and indeed of the New Testament to prove his point. Michelstaedter and Svevos' Jewishness brought about a radical element in their writing, "radical" in its most literal sense viz., that they questioned the very "roots" of the Christian civilisation that surrounded and oppressed them, came under scrutiny, wittingly or not, as the case may have been.*

* Other "radical" Jewish thinkers and writers such as Marx, Freud and Kafka come to mind.

Yet speaking in a strictly Italian context, it should be pointed out that Michelstaedter and Svevo formed part of a generation of writers who came from Hapsburgian Italy, many of whom shared a dramatic destiny, some having died before the Great War was over: Gozzano, Serra, and Corazzini. This is not to mention other writers born in the 1880's, who became significant voices of the 20th century: Prezzolini (b. 1882), Papini (b. 1881), Soffici (b. 1879), Amendola (b. 1882), Slataper (b. 1888), Boine (b. 1887), Jahier (b. 1884), Michelstaedter (b. 1887), Boccioni (b. 1882), Carrà (b. 1881), Saba (b. 1883), and Palazzeschi (b. 1885). Moreover, and in a specifically Italian context, Michelstaedter and Svevo might understandably be grouped amongst the writers of the "decadentismo italiano", along with D'Annunzio, although both Michelstaedter and Svevo defy too rigid a categorisation. However, Michelstaedter in particular is very much part of the post-Sedan generation, that battle which symbolised the end of Romanticism and which led to the formation of a "new bourgeoisie", i.e., an "aristocracy" rendered such by money.

Trieste specifically deserves mention, having brought forth writers such as Svevo, Slataper, Ruggero Fauro, Saba and Stuparich. It was, after all, a city more exposed to the German-speaking world and decidedly more autonomous in respect of the cultural expression of the rest of Italy.¹³ One can also speak of an "incontro" between Trieste and Florence, of which Michelstaedter is an example, having gone to study in Florence to imbibe Italian culture whilst coming, as he did, from the periphery of that culture. Likewise, Svevo also aspired to writing in Tuscan Italian and was acutely aware of the fact that his style of writing did not bear witness to a prolonged exposure to a more classical mode of expression.¹⁴

It is at this point that one has to note more specifically the purely cultural context in which Michelstaedter and Svevo found themselves respectively.

"Trieste rimase dunque fino al 1915 la città dove la borghesia in ascesa, quella "conquistatrice", tanto per riprendere un'espressione ormai canonica, trovò un campo di espansione ideale. Altro che crisi! In quella prospettiva, i tre romanzi di Svevo, nonché quelli rimasti incompiuti e molte novelle, ci offrono un ritratto abbastanza fedele all'ambiente mercantile, ancorché parziale poiché non vi appaiono né i conflitti provocati dalla politica d'infiltrazione etnica, né le conseguenti e violente reazioni della comunità italiana."¹⁵

[Thus Trieste remained until 1915, the city where the bourgeoisie in ascendance, the "conquering" bourgeoisie, to use once again an expression by now canonical, found an ideal field of expansion. It was anything but a crisis! In this regard, Svevo's three novels, let alone those which had remained unfinished and the many short stories, offer us a portrait sufficiently faithful to the mercantile ambience, even though partially so since there conflicts appear neither conflicts provoked by the politics of ethnic infiltration, nor the consequent and violent reactions of the Italian community.]

Hence one notes the complexity and the ambiguity inherent not only in being Jewish, but also in living in a city and a part of Europe so close to the very nerve centre of many of the political issues that were to erupt in the First World War. As Marco Cerruti has observed in speaking of Michelstaedter:

"Una sottile inquietudine tiene gli animi . . . Nonostante la vaghezza di taluni rilievi, la pagina possiede ancora, a nostro giudizio, una notevole forza di suggestione, e non tanto per la colorita vivacità del linguaggio, quanto per il fatto che, scritta nell'imminenza della prima guerra mondiale, essa è dunque un testimone della crisi, nel momento in cui questa trovava il suo esito estremo nella catastrofe bellica."¹⁶

[A subtle disquietude grips people's . . . Notwithstanding the vagueness of certain details, the page possesses yet, in our judgement, a powerful force of suggestion. This is due not so much to the colourful vivacity of language, as to the fact that, written in the imminence of the First World War, the page is thus a testimony to the crisis, in the moment in which this crisis was finding its extreme outcome in the catastrophe of war.]

He continues:

"Esiste in effetti . . . un rapporto reale e profondo fra l'insorgere di una nevrosi e l'insieme di condizioni (a livello sociale, economico, politico, ecc.) dell'ambiente in cui essa si produce."¹⁷

[There does in fact exist . . . a real and profound relationship between the insurgence of a neurosis and the combination of circumstances (on a social, political and economic level etc.,) of the environment, which in turn produces the neurosis.]

This incipient disquiet has also been described by another scholar as follows:

"... [I]n quasi tutti gli scrittori giuliani del primo ventennio di questo secolo c'è un comune fisonomia di impegno spirituale e morale di idee e di vita oltre che di sentimento serio e profondo."¹⁸

[... [I]n almost all the Julian writers of the first two decades of this century there is a common physiognomy of a spiritual and moral involvement in ideas and in life above and beyond serious and profound feeling.]

Hence we are not dealing with a phenomenon that was limited to Svevo and Michelstaedter alone. the latter two writers are probably the most prominent of the group "Scrittori giuliani".¹⁹ Svevo is, of course, the one writer of this group whose fame extended beyond the Italian-speaking world and it is Michelstaedter, in whom a renewed interest has been evoked in very recent times.

We have mentioned earlier that Michelstaedter was much younger than Svevo and as can be gleaned from the former's letters, an emotional immaturity and dependence upon his parents becomes apparent, a fact that belies his intellectual precocity.

"Ti ringrazio papà per le cento lire, che non potranno bastarmi, anche pel viaggio perché part. [endo] Il [sic] 24 non risparmiò che 6 giorni di trattoria, cioè 20 franchi, - purtroppo. - E se poi c'è la sessione dell'esame d'Aprile [sic] immediatamente dopo le vacanze! Sono furibondo a questa idea perché crepo dal desiderio di tornare a casa."²⁰

[I thank you, Dad, for the 100 liras, which will not suffice even for the journey because departing on the 24th I save only 6 days of food, that is, 20 francs, - unfortunately. - And then, what about exam session in April immediately after the holidays? I am furious about this idea because I am dying from the desire to return home.]

It would not be germane to our discussion at this point to engage in a character analysis of Michelstaedter based on his letters. They do, however, provide an invaluable insight into his precocious intellectual development and his troublesome emotional development, as well as into the multi-faceted nature of his thinking. The following observation has been made in regard to his letters and that which can be gleaned from them:

"Fils d'une époque, et on pourrait alors retrouver ici l'explication historiciste, qui démystifie, qui détruit, qui s'abandonne volontiers au cynisme, Carlo se voit submergé par les réalités. Il se débat, tel un héros musilien avant la lettre, entre son besoin d'absolu et d'idéalisme et la certitude de son impuissance à le satisfaire. De ce déchirement, il parle trop, et se prend au lacet de ses propres mots. C'est alors que le revolver entre en scène."²¹

[The son of an era - we could then here revert to the historicist explanation which demystifies, which destroys, which willingly gives way to cynicism - Carlo finds himself overwhelmed by reality, he struggles like a Musilian hero *ante litteram*, between his need for the absolute and idealism and the certitude of his own incapacity to fulfil that idealism. Of this rupture he speaks too much, and he is a prisoner of rhetoric. It is at this point that the revolver makes its appearance.]

Herein, Maryse Jeuland-Meynaud⁴ puts Michelstaedter in an historical and psychological context. The temptation exists, especially in Michelstaedter's case, to explain the thematic significance of his writing in a purely psychological and historical vein. Pertinent as this may be in his case and in Svevo's case as well, the focus of this study is the thematic similarities and differences contained in each writer's respective texts. This notwithstanding, a writer, if he attains universality transcends the immediate confines of his being. It is in this light that the following point (made specifically in regard to Nietzsche) applies to most writers in varying degrees:

"Così anche la filosofia di Nietzsche [come quella di Michelstaedter] *nasce dentro la storia ma cresce poi oltre il proprio specifico orizzonte*." [Stresses Chiarini's]²²

[So too, the philosophy of Nietzsche [like that of Michelstaedter] *is born within history, but then grows beyond its own specific horizon*.]

Having asserted that a writer can transcend his own psycho-historical influences, it is necessary to examine the specific influences exerted upon Michelstaedter and Svevo respectively. In other words, who were their cultural mentors? Michelstaedter found himself impervious to the cultural sway of D'Annunzio and Pascoli and beyond the influence of the perplexities associated with "I Crepuscolari". Nevertheless, there does seem to be a D'Annunzian trait in his thinking. More precisely, this trait appears to consist

of an obsession with himself, as well as the an élitist tendency in his thinking. These two factors remind one of D'Annunzio's *L'innocente*. Michelstaedter's "superomismo" is not unlike the Nietzschean ideal, in that he advocates the destruction of all that we inherit; the subsequent aspiration to truth; and the stoic and/or heroic acceptance of the consequences thereof.

The word "nihilism" becomes inevitable in any discussion of either Nietzsche or Michelstaedter. Yet this is a convenient misnomer. Michelstaedter's categorical denial of all sources of philosophic (in particular Aristotilian) intellectual, psychological and emotional comfort and illusion, has been viewed as being "nihilistic", when in fact, viewed in a different light, it is instead a courageous stance that he is adopting. This is true because there are strong elements of renewal in his thinking. He exhorts. Svevo, on the other hand, is resigned and distant. Michelstaedter's thesis is a highly personalised account of himself and is the exposition of a specific *Weltanschauung*. Svevo, as mentioned initially, was a novelist. He created a mechanism by which to distance himself, Ettore Schmitz, from his creation, Zeno. Obviously, there are links between Svevo and his Zeno. But in Michelstaedter, the man himself is the symbolic embodiment of "persuasione", whilst it is his *alter ego* that very plausibly embodies the concept of "rettorica".

The crisis of Hegelian logic, Positivism, and the optimism of Croce, all find a proud adversary in Carlo Michelstaedter. This incisive observation by Piromalli²³ serves *inter alia* to illustrate that Michelstaedter's is a response, an original and compelling response, concise and intense, to a world from which he felt acutely alienated. To label him out of hand as being nihilistic is both tempting and simplistic. The compelling aspect of his thinking, besides his rigid honesty and uncompromising philosophic posture is the peculiar nature of his contribution to the Italian intellectual heritage. And in European terms, he expounded a view of life which became more than vogue. Indeed, it became intellectually

entrenched and solidified decades later with writers such as Sartre, Camus and Pinter.

Similarly, La coscienza di Zeno, Svevo's major novel and the one most conspicuously saturated with Freudian influences,²⁴ though written in an ironic vein - presaged much of what was to follow in European literature and intellectual trends. In particular, he cast doubt on the facile belief in technology and psychology as a panacea long before these had become employed in excessive measure and more often than not ethically abused.

In generic terms, Italian culture of the period during the Decadentismo Italiano, tended to provide an *appearance* of things, with the emphasis being placed on the senses and on aesthetics. This might be viewed, but only simplistically and erroneously, as a reversal or a "retrogressive" step when one bears in mind the Verismo of Verga. Hence, it might be said that in terms of Italian literary history following Verga, Italian literature had had no exponents of "reality" as it were, save for Pirandello, Svevo,²⁵ and Michelstaedter during the epoch of Decadentismo. Indeed, the similarities between Svevo and Michelstaedter have been alluded to by Gianpaolo Biasin²⁶ and further elucidated by Piero Pieri.²⁷ Besides the affinity between Svevo and Michelstaedter, there is also an affinity between Pirandello and Michelstaedter. This we trust will become implicitly more apparent as we proceed.

We have seen in this chapter that Michelstaedter and Svevo shared a common cultural, linguistic and religious heritage, let us now turn our attention to how that heritage crystallised in the former's La persuasione e la rettorica and in the latter's La coscienza di Zeno.

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- ²Stirner, Max, L'unico e la sua proprietà, trans. by (?), Adelphi, Milano, 1978, p. 23. This book was written in German and published in 1848. The Italian translator of the edition cited herein is not available to the present writer.
- ³Michelstaedter, Carlo, La persuasione e la retorica, Adelphi, Milano, 1982, p. 94.
- ⁴Ibid., p. 69.
- ⁵Ibid.
- ⁶Fölkel, Ferruccio, "Qualche appunto sull' 'Hebraïtude' della cultura nel territorio goriziano-triestino" in Ebrei e Mitteleuropa, Istituto per gli Incontri Mitteleuropei, Gorizia, 1984, p. 260.
- ⁷Anzellotti, Fulvio, Il segreto di Svevo, Edizioni Studio Tesi, Pordenone, 1985, p. 46.
- ⁸Campailla, Sergio, "Ebraismo e letteratura", in Ebrei e Mitteleuropa, Istituto per gli Incontri Mitteleuropei, Gorizia, 1984, p. 24.
- ⁹Fölkel, F. op.cit., p. 261.
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. 263.
- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²Campailla, S. op.cit., p. 30.
- ¹³Asor Rosa, Alberto, Storia d'Italia, vol. 14, Einaudi, Torino, 1974, p. 1274 f.
- ¹⁴Fölkel, Ferruccio, "Trieste provincia imperiale, intellettuali di frontiera" in Triestini a Firenze (1900-1950), Il Comune, Firenze, 1983, p. 85.
- ¹⁵Jeuland-Meynaud, Maryse, Zeno e i suoi fratelli, Pàtron Editore, Bologna, 1985, p. 365.
- ¹⁶Cerruti, Marco, Carlo Michelstaedter, Mimesis, Milano, 1967, p. 17.
- ¹⁷Ibid.
- ¹⁸Piromalli, Antonio, Michelstaedter, La Nuova Italia, Firenze, 1968, p. 10.
- ¹⁹Vide Campailla, Sergio, Scrittori Giuliani, Pàtron Editore, Bologna, 1974.
- ²⁰Michelstaedter, Carlo, Epistolario, Adelphi, Milano, 1983, p. 189.
- ²¹Jeuland-Meynaud, Maryse, "Mourir Pour d'écrire: Reflexions sur un epistolaire", Cahier d'études romaines, no. 9, Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, 1984, p. 108.
- ²²Chiarini, Paolo, Intro. a Nietzsche, F., La nascita della tragedia, tr. ? Laterza, Bari, 1981, p. xxvi.
- ²³Piromalli, A. op.cit., p. 4.
- ²⁴Vide Fonda, Carlo, Svevo e Freud, Longo Editore, Ravenna, 1978.

²⁵Vide Barilla, Renato, La Linea Svevo-Pirandello, Mursia, Milano, 1972, p. 9. And also Jeurand-Meynaud, Zeno e i suoi fratelli, pp. 60 - 62.

²⁶Biasin, Gianpaolo, Literary Discases, University of Texas Press, Austin and London, 1975, pp. 81 - 85.

²⁷Picri, Piero, La scienza del tragico: Saggio su Carlo Michelstaedter, Cappelli Editore, Bologna, 1989, p. 343 ff.

CHAPTER TWO

"The individual triumphs in the renunciation of the individual".¹

In this chapter we shall explore the philosophical and literary similarities and differences between Svevo and Michelstaedter. Let us commence with the following observation by Gianpaolo Biasin:

"... there is a striking similarity between Svevo's conception of life and death and that of Carlo Michelstaedter - a resemblance that is all the more striking because there are no proofs of their acquaintance or friendship between the two writers and consequently the similarity must be ascribed for the major part to a common background of Mitteleuropean culture and sensitivity. Michelstaedter's life was dominated by a longing for an ideal absolute - an ideal that sprang from his study of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The impossibility of finding a compromise between his longing and the mechanical possibilities, between the ideal and reality."²

In effect, Biasin is implying that Svevo, more by sheer coincidence rather than by any possible personal or literary acquaintanceship, presents an embodiment, a literary "expression", as it were, of Michelstaedter's ideas, even though there are no traces whatever of any intention on Svevo's part to do so:

"The ontology underlying the idea that life is disease is completed by the consequent idea that real health is actually death."³

This concept of life as disease is one which they each adhere to and come to terms with, each in their own way.

A recurrent theme in the comparison of Svevo and Michelstaedter is the juxtaposition of opposites such as "vita/morte", "salute/malattia", "amore/odio". In fact, in both authors' works this forms part of an intentional irony. This irony in turn forms the essence of their respective debates on perfection, its attainability, and indeed its desirability.

The word "vita" as used by Michelstaedter implies on the one hand, that life as lived by the "uomo della rettorica" is in fact death, and only the "uomo della persuasione" experiences true "vita" - "life" as conceived, understood by Michelstaedter. Michelstaedter essentially sees life as "worthy" essentially when it is lived with honour and idealism, two human virtues which do not allow life to be subverted by "vile" emotional and physical necessities. As for the "l'uomo della rettorica", life as lived by him is in fact death, in that his life is based on mere perpetuation of existence, which perpetuation in turn arises from fear of death. "Morte" then takes on the significance of release.

"Ogni presente della loro [cioè degli uomini] vita ha in sé la morte. La loro vita non è che paura della morte. Chi teme la morte è già morto . . ." ⁴

[Every moment of their life has within itself death. Their life is nothing but fear of death. He who fears death is already dead.]

Conversely, whoever faces death, confronts it, destroys the fear of death, thereby acquiring that "life" which in Michelstaedter's terms, is "true", honest and worthy. The "uomo della rettorica" being the man of words, is cowardly and given to self-deception, whereas the "uomo della persuasione" transcends the limitations life imposes on him.

The essence of life, according to Michelstaedter is as follows:

Chi vuol aver un attimo solo *sua* vita, esser un attimo solo persuaso di ciò che fa - deve impossessarsi del presente; *vedere ogni presente come l'ultimo*, come se fosse certa dopo la morte; *e nell'oscurità crearsi da sé la vita*.⁵ [Stresses Michelstaedter's].

[He who wants *his* life for one moment only, to be convinced for one moment only of that which he does - must take possession of the present; *must see every present moment as being the last*; as if afterwards death were certain; *and in darkness create life by himself*.]

These two observations by Michelstaedter are fraught with implications. Firstly we see here that "presente" in Michelstaedter's terms, is to be taken literally. He does indeed intend the "here and now". Life must not be lived with one's sights always placed on the

future because such projection in temporal terms becomes, in effect, an act of duping oneself into believing in the future. In short such a projection becomes a transmuted term of self-deception. The full weight of the present must be borne by the individual if his life is to have any "worth". He states that man tends to look to the future and does not confront the present. Indeed, he looks to the future precisely in order (either consciously or unconsciously) not to engage his mind with the present, the unbearableness of which he seeks to deny. All of this is thus viewed by Michelstaedter as an ultimate denial of life itself.

In Svevo, his play on the words "salute/malattia", which corresponds to Michelstaedter's play on "vita/morte", is much more complex and subtle. As Jeuland-Meynaud points out,⁶ Michelstaedter was a logician, and logic was an "infallible" tool (a device which Svevo does not rely on) to convey his, Michelstaedter's vision of the world and mankind.

In broad outlines, Svevo's La coscienza di Zeno deals with a "patient", Zeno Cosini, whose confessions to his analyst are published by the analyst himself as a vendetta, because Zeno stopped being treated by the analyst. This of course is a gross breach of confidence, of professional confidentiality and ethics. It is an unconscionable violation of the patient-doctor relationship and it is patently a travesty of Freudian techniques of psychoanalysis. By presenting to the reader the purported or putative confessions, Svevo transports the reader into the ostensibly sick mind of Zeno Cosini. However, as the novel progresses, one is made aware of the myriad of ironies in Svevo's novel, of which the ironic use of "malattia/salute" is but one. Briefly, Svevo shows the reader how Zeno, being ill in societal terms, is in fact paradoxically better adapted to modern man's environment, "adapted", being used in the Darwinian sense. In other words, it is precisely because Zeno is the paragon of mediocrity that he survives. (The novel is written with the First World War as a backdrop, but this is rarely specifically referred to. Yet, when one considers the novel La coscienza di Zeno as a symptom of the times and at the same time as a novel of

prophecy, the significance of its time of writing becomes all too clear: It is a novel which investigates the modern mind, the modern mind that made the First World War possible, a war which was the culmination of centuries of modern man's disease. Furthermore, at the risk of stating the obvious, the First World War destroyed social distinctions, a system of values and a way of life filled with certainties that had supported the edifice of Western Civilization for centuries). Svevo takes the reader into the mind of what modern man has become, the unheroic Zeno, devoid of absolute values to which to aspire. The aspiration to health is but a symptom of the fundamental disease in that only if one is diseased in the first place, is the need for health recognised.

Those in the novel who aspire, heroically, to the bourgeois norms, are the ones who succumb. What society perceives as Zeno's malady, is in fact his health. What society perceives as health, is in fact society's malady. As we have mentioned, the novel is densely ironic. Little at first reading is what it appears to be. (It is also in this regard that Svevo and Pirandello would seem to have a mutual affinity.) The following quotation is typical of what one finds in La coscienza di Zeno:

"Ero andato da quel medico perché m'era stato detto che guariva le malattie nervose con l'elettricità. Io pensai di poter ricavare dall'elettricità la forza che occorreva per lasciare il fumo."⁷

[I had gone to that doctor because I had been told that he cured nervous ailments with electricity. I thought I could draw from electricity the strength necessary to stop smoking.]

In this we see Svevo being bitterly yet delightfully ironic. Firstly, Zeno goes to the doctor to cure his smoking with "electricity". This in itself, to understate the matter, is rather far-fetched. Though Svevo presents Zeno's decision to go to the analyst as being quite "normal", he ridicules, nonetheless, the idea of electro-shock treatment more than he does

Zeno's apparent faith in the treatment. Moreover, Zeno believes that electricity is "technology" and something "outside" himself, i.e., beyond his own will-power, and that it will give him the "forza", the strength necessary to stop smoking. Svevo uses Zeno to convey contemporary man's dependence on modern technology to correct what Zeno or contemporary man could himself do by the mere exertion of his own will-power. Indeed, man's enslavement to technology is a recurrent theme of the novel.

The question arises: What are Michelstaedter and Svevos' respective interpretations in respect of perfection, bearing in mind that authenticity, freedom, and renewal are components of this "perfection"? Svevo's understanding of perfection cannot be viewed in isolation from the strong Darwinian element in his thinking.

"For Darwin the whole concept of perfection was at best useless and at worst a pernicious notion applied arbitrarily to those adaptations that seemed to conform best to a human view of how some biological task could be done. If the biological task was simply 'the ability to reproduce', no adaptation, however distasteful or seemingly incompetent could legitimately be denied the attribute of perfection."⁸

It is interesting to compare this to what Svevo has to say on the subject:

"... [M]entre gli altri animali cessavano dalla vera vita ch'è, l'evoluzione, l'uomo inventò una nuova evoluzione fuori del proprio organismo e la perseguì instancabile sempre torvo e malcontento, l'aspetto dell'animale che ha l'anima attiva. Ma il suo organismo non poté più evolversi perché altrimenti egli avrebbe dovuto far getto degli ordigni che non potevano essere maneggiati che da chi aveva non quattro mani nè quattro piedi ma due piedi soli e due mani capaci di afferrare e perciò dalle unghie deboli."⁹

[Whilst the other animals discontinuing the true life, that is, evolution, man invented a new evolution beyond his own organism and pursued it tirelessly, always, surly and discontented -the aspect of an animal that has an active spirit. But his organism could not longer evolve because otherwise he would have had to dispense with the tools that could not have been wielded by anyone save by one who had neither four hands nor four feet, but two feet only and two hands capable of gripping, and thus endowed with weak nails.]

In both these passages there is an element of doubt, of scepticism cast upon the very idea of perfection, a certain detachment, in fact. Svevo reduces man to a product of evolution, in

fact a product of evolution that has lost its way. His observation seems to imply that man is out of step with the rest of nature and hence his description of man as being "torvo" (surly) and "malcontento", "discontented". Man is alien to his environment, or has adapted to it in such a way as to render any discourse on perfection or idealistic view of man utterly irrelevant and superfluous.

It is against this background that one also needs to look at the question of "salute/malattia":

"Ma per conoscere il cammino segreto, che lo porta all'intesa con il suo personaggio, occorre risalire a una fase antecedente, cogliere Svevo nel momento in cui cominciano a precisarsi le sue idee sulla "malattia". Esse hanno un'evidente origine darwiniana, e sono permeate dal bisogno di collegare la "malattia" all'evoluzione dell'uomo. E chiaro che questo rapporto avrebbe solo un valore metaforico e un'intonazione paradossale, se non esistesse lo stadio finale, rappresentato da Zeno."¹⁰

[But in order to know his secret voyage that brings him to the understanding with his proxy, it is necessary to go back to an antecedent phase, and to capture Svevo in the moment in which his ideas on "disease" begin to define themselves. These ideas have an evident Darwinian origin and are permeated by the desire to link "disease" to the evolution of man. It is clear that this relationship would have a metaphorical value and a paradoxical intonation, were the final stage, represented by Zeno, not to exist.]

Svevo elucidates further:

"In tutta la natura è difficile spiegare l'inizio di una cosa o d'una idea. Il suo sviluppo poi è questione di ambiente, di clima, d'adattamento o anche di logica. Dal Mammuth il servizio del piccolo uomo divenne tanto importante ch'egli sentiva il bisogno della sua presenza come degli alberi di cui viveva, dei prati su cui si muoveva, persino dell'aria che respirava. Così è fatto l'animale privo d'anima. Non è lui che evolve perché già perfetto rinunziò alla vera vita."¹¹

[In all Nature, it is difficult to explain the inception of a thing or idea. Its development is then a question of environment, of climate, of adaptation or even logic. Since the mammoth, the service of the little man became so important, that the mammoth felt the need of the little man's presence as he did that of the trees from which he lived, of the meadows over which he moved, even of the air that he breathed. Thus was the animal devoid of soul made. It is not he who evolves because, already perfect, he renounced true life.]

Svevo's Zeno is just such a "piccolo uomo" - as is Michelstaedter's "uomo della rettorica". Svevo is saying by implication and with scathing irony that if there is such a thing as perfection - the dream of a perfect man and hence a perfect society - then Zeno is that "perfect" man in that he can no longer develop any further; that is as far as the word "perfection" could in any way be applicable. For the rest, Zeno is a devastating parody of the very concept of perfection so what we have here is a coincidence of views on the part of Michelstaedter and Svevo. Both recognise the mediocrity in modern man with the "uomo della rettorica" and the "piccolo uomo"/Zeno respectively.

In this idea of "la vera vita", there is an implicit value judgement. That is to say, by his use of the words "vera vita", Svevo is patently implying that there is such a thing as a "vita non vera", and thus further indicating implicitly that that is what is experienced by humanity at large. He implies that there is something profoundly amiss in modern Man. Michelstaedter's version of a remarkably similar idea is expressed as follows:

"Il senso delle cose, il sapore del mondo è solo pel continuare, esser nati non è che voler continuare: gli uomini vivono per vivere: per non morire. La loro persuasione è la paura della morte, esser nati non è che temere la morte." [Stresses Michelstaedter's.]¹²

[The sense of things, the taste of the world, is only for the sake of continuing. To be *born* is but to wish to continue: Men live in order to live: in order *not to die*. Their conviction is *the fear of death*; to be *born* is only to *fear death*.]

Here we have Michelstaedter's fundamental criticism in regard to Man's way of living his life. He condemns life lived merely for the sake of its own continuation and implicit in his criticism is the lack of something absolute, life lived as mere expediency, in short life as lived by Svevo's Zeno.

Svevo, however, succinctly links a variety of ideas which, compositely, form a significant antidote to the urgency of Michelstaedter's "intuition", as it were. At the same time,

however, and somewhat paradoxically, Svevo concurs with Michelstaedter:

"Verrà il tempo in cui l'uomo non temerà più di morire. Una bellissima speranza! Proprio l'elevamento di un cervello e di un cuore grandi. Questa speranza che in fondo non è irrealizzabile e ch'è una grande speranza. L'uomo dell'avvenire abbozzato con queste parole non sarebbe un eroe; in lui nessuna tendenza a far getto della vita, che diverrebbe anzi più lieta. Venuta la sua ora, e avesse a suonar in qualunque momento egli direbbe tranquillo: Ecco mi qua!"¹³

[The time will come in which man will no longer fear dying. An exceedingly beautiful hope! It is indeed the elevation of a great brain and a great heart - this hope which fundamentally is not an unattainable hope and which is a great hope. The man of the future sketched with these words would not be a hero; in him there is no tendency to rid himself of life - a life which, on the contrary, would become happier. His hour having come, and were it to ring at any moment, tranquilly he would say: "Here I am!"]

Is this not what Michelstaedter is in fact saying? In this passage it is evident that Svevo had given thought to the notion of man transcending and overcoming his fear of death, but with customary irony he ridicules the naïveté of the notion. He takes this a step further in that he approaches the question of death and the fear of it, with humour and detachment. He de-dramatises, "sdrammatizza[re]" this question and says that to be free of the fear of death is for the "cuori grandi", - (and for the purposes of this comparative study) - for the likes of Michelstaedter's "uomo della persuasione". His "future man" would be so mediocre and enfeebled that when his time came he would simply accept it because he had never even pondered the issue. Again we see in contrasting Michelstaedter and Svevo's respective notions, that Michelstaedter is totally absorbed by the conquest of the fear of death, whereas Svevo can afford to be detached from the whole question - at least as far as his text here above indicates. Michelstaedter vehemently criticises this weakness, namely man's fear of death, whereas Svevo foresees a time when "future man" will be so derelict as to accept death with stupidity, not even resignation. The notion of resignation implies the acknowledgement and recognition of the inability of an ideal to become reality and this demonstrates that there is an awareness of a larger issue at stake, namely the reason why we live and the significance of life and death. The "future man" which Svevo describes in

the preceding quotation is too degenerate to have even recognised the issue as such in the first place.

It is at this stage that one observes that the themes of perfection, authenticity, and freedom cannot be definitively separated one from the other. They are inextricably linked and form part of a cohesive scepticism in which both writers find solace and justification for their respective ideas in the writings of preceding thinkers. Svevo finds it in his quasi-anthropological approach, i.e., his Darwinism, whilst Michelstaedter draws upon the truths perceived by Parmenides and other pre-Socratic thinkers.* Svevo and Michelstaedter both go back to fundamentals, the origins, albeit each in his own terms and in his own manner, in order to motivate and substantiate their respective thinking.

This unavoidable point lends cohesion to their commonly shared view, viz., that modern Man is a "fallen" creature, a residue, or an apostasy of sorts, that has rendered Man a shadow of what he might be or might have been. His individuality has been steadily eroded as society and civilisation have ostensibly progressed.¹⁴

As Sergio Campailla observes:

"... [P]er ricongiungersi alla sapienza antica. Michelstaedter non cita in greco, ma parla in greco, cioè nella lingua di Parmenide e di Socrate, la madrelingua della cultura occidentale."¹⁵

[In order to reunite himself to ancient wisdom, Michelstaedter does not quote in Greek, but speaks in Greek, that is, in the language of Parmenides and Socrates - the mother tongue of Western culture.]

*Vide Chapter III, below.

Indeed, Michelstaedter explicitly asserts that

"Tutti i progressi della civiltà sono regressi dell'individuo."¹⁶

[All the progress of civilization is the retrogression of the individual.]

The implications of this statement are far-reaching in terms of the present enquiry. This latter statement by Michelstaedter is not only consonant with Svevo's idea of the demise of the individual it also coincides with Svevo's notion of the impossibility on the part of the individual to attain an idealised state of perfection. Indeed, Svevo might well consider such an assertion, such as Michelstaedter's above as an undeniable, indeed obvious fact. For Michelstaedter, however, the notion of the impossibility of the individual to attain perfection would seem to be too ghastly to contemplate and a notion which inspires his adulation of individuality, albeit to the point of exaggeration. Perfection and individuality are synonymous in Michelstaedter's view. One notes a recurrent tendency in Michelstaedter when one compares him to Svevo, namely, the former's inability to look beyond his own ideas, his inability to accept the truth despite his apprehension or intuition of it. Svevo, however, takes the same ideas and accepts them with the benign resignation and irony which his maturity confers. Michelstaedter, on the other hand, reacts in the manner of a somewhat impetuous youth against that which is unacceptable to him, and he reacts to life in a dramatic fashion, be it in his personal life or in his text. In short, Svevo accepts the unattainability of perfection. In fact, he refutes such a possibility and considers it potentially dangerous. Michelstaedter differs radically from Svevo in this regard. He aspires to perfection and cannot come to terms with the ultimate implications of his own ideas, unless through suicide or if perfection is to be viewed as a state to be confined to the hereafter. (Suicide has a particular significance in Michelstaedter's case and this fact will become clearer as we proceed). Michelstaedter and Svevo, however, do concur that perfection is found in death, and it is precisely here that their respective views coincide and

mesh, both authors sharing, as they do, the concept of "la vita è una malattia mortale".

"Nacque il malcontento e torvo uomo. Imperfettissimo non ebbe le ali e neppure quattro mani come i quadrumani né quattro piedi come le fiere ma sempre due mani e due piedi soli, questi per portar lentamente quelle tuttavia male armate. Animale disgraziatissimo."¹⁷

[Discontented and surly man was born. Most imperfect, he had no wings or even four hands as quadrumans, nor four feet as the beasts, but always just two hands and two feet, the latter fashioned slowly bear the former which, in any event, were ill-armed. A most unfortunate animal.]

Thus, it would now seem appropriate to place the issues at hand in a wider context. Simply stated, Michelstaedter strives for perfection, does not find it, and reacts against life itself. Svevo, on the other hand, also comes to terms with the mutual exclusivity of life and perfection, but in doing so does not react against life itself. He does not personalise his disenchantment with life. Rather, he universalises it and detaches himself (with consequently greater objectivity) from his disenchantment, by his seeking refuge and expression one might say, in his art. The insufferability of life, however, takes on an intensely personal dimension in Michelstaedter, in that he reacts against life itself, making his reaction intensely personal. His only solace seems to be the articulation of his disenchantment, at least so it would appear initially. The intensely personal and subjective aspect in Michelstaedter's thinking need not be viewed as a limitation, nor does it detract from the validity of his views. It is not a limitation in that through the apparent extremism of his views (which owe their origin in part to his absorption with himself), he arrives at an uncompromising stance vis-à-vis life, posing questions and views which touch the very roots of man's human condition. It can plausibly be said that at one level, Michelstaedter's view of life is the *non plus ultra* of pessimism. He expresses the unthinkable in terms of life's inherent meaning and/or lack thereof. In so doing, his personalised account of his struggle lends an urgency and an intimacy to his stance, unobscured by sophisms, intellectual erudition or narrative artistry. Svevo is a narrative artist, and in practising his art, he distils

and projects a *Weltanschauung*. Michelstaedter's *Weltanschauung*, by way of comparison, takes shape in a relentless assertion of what he, Michelstaedter conceives to be the essence of life. His work, however, does not reflect the multi-faceted complexity and synthesis which is evident in Svevo's La coscienza di Zeno. To illustrate, Michelstaedter presents one with two alternatives only, namely either "persuasione" or "rettorica" and he treats the ambiguity inherent in his use of the words "vita" and "morte" in an almost simplistic manner. Svevo, on the other hand, reflects in his work, La coscienza di Zeno, an intimate awareness of the myriad of contradictions, deceptions and ironies which shape the life of Zeno Cosini and the world which the latter inhabits, i.e., the world of Modern Man. This essential difference in the approach of the two writers can be explained partially by the fact that Svevo had the techniques of the novelist at his command, whereas Michelstaedter did not. The absolutist, categorical and tendentious bent in Michelstaedter's work, his "all or nothing" approach, besides being indicative of his youth, betrays the limitation of his field of reference, his purview. And precisely therefrom derives his inability to synthesise. This would seem to be confirmed, furthermore, by the fact that his philosophy, his vision of the ideal, is impracticable in that the ideal he prescribes and describes in respect of the "uomo della persuasione" is beyond human experience and, if it is within human experience, is allied to the Nietzschean superman or Jesus Christ or Buddha or any other figures of human aspiration.

The cognisance of this impracticability took the form of suicide, his vision most probably not having been able to be realised by him in any other way. His vision does, however, have a distinct merit, in that it resides primarily in an uncompromising honesty. But it is this honesty, this rigidity of thought, which is taken to the extreme, viz., to the point where life, as an experience bound only to time, itself is denied. In fact, Michelstaedter's quest has been called "La rivolta impossibile".¹⁸

The question that next arises, and a compelling one it is, concerns the origin of Michelstaedter's extremism. It has been pointed out that his disenchantment with life is highly personalised and it is therefore to Michelstaedter, the young man, "il giovane goriziano", that we must turn in order to assess the text of which he is the author. An invaluable source in understanding Michelstaedter's text is, of course, his Epistolario.

The following observation has been made apropos Epistolario and the efficacy of looking for sources outside the text, in order to arrive at a more pertinent understanding of that same text:

"Il est plusieurs manières d'expliquer la décision désespérée de Michelstaedter. La plus courante consiste à historiciser son problème en l'incluant dans ce courant schopenhauérien du mal de vivre qui frappa l'époque décadente, et plus particulièrement la jeunesse mitteleuropéenne, et parmi celle-ci la jeunesse juive dont Kafka, Weininger, Saba, Svevo, sans parler des pères fondateurs de la psychanalyse, seraient quelques-uns des représentants les plus illustres. Chacun d'eux apporterait la preuve de la crise de la conscience européenne, d'un grand malaise dans la bourgeoisie et d'un désarroi général des esprits en cette veille de la première guerre mondiale. Les explications par le collectif sont aussi faciles que vagues. Elles portent un diagnostic qui constate le mal mais ne tient pas compte des malades dont chaque cas est unique." [Stress mine.]¹⁹

[There are various ways of explaining Michelstaedter's desperate decision. The most current view tends to historicise his problem within the Schopenhauerian view of the "mal de vivre" which tormented the decadent era, and more specifically the "Mitteleuropean" youth and within this, the Jewish youth of which Kafka, Weininger, Saba, Svevo,- (without mentioning the founding fathers of psychoanalysis),- would be some of their most illustrious representatives. Each one of them would bring proof of the crisis of the European consciousness, of a great malaise among the bourgeoisie and of a general intellectual disarray on the eve of the First World War. Collective explanations are as easy as they are vague. They make a diagnosis which establishes the presence of the disease but does not take into account the diseased who are unique in each case.]

In fact, this obsession with truth, which characterises Michelstaedter's La persuasione e la retorica is reflected in his letters which clearly reveal the origins of this obsession and its markedly pessimistic nature. The question that arises then, is whether Michelstaedter's pessimism is not perhaps a result of frustrated ideals caused by his inability to reach the absolute. Michelstaedter's "absolute" referred to here is his desire to divest life entirely of

needs such as love, religion, hope, bread, and structures that maintain the illusion of meaning. In short, to be the "superman", and to acquire the moral perfection that his "l'uomo della persuasione" embodies. His letters reflect a gradual pessimism, but ever more intensified, and which relate events which could not but have had a profound effect on his psyche - in particular the death of Nadia, a girl whom he loved dearly, the death of his brother Gino* and the departure to the Argentine of his closest friend and confidant, Enrico Mreule. To Mreule he wrote:

"Nell'oscurità della mia vita di questi giorni, che passa stilla a stilla interminabile, io vivo la mia vita più intima con te."²¹

[In the darkness of my life these days, a life which passes by interminably drop by drop, I live my most intimate life with you.]

In the same way that Enrico Mreule departed for the unknown, Michelstaedter, as an act of volition, chose to discover life by confronting its ultimate mystery, death.

"Le suicide lui offrit peut-être aussi le moyen de rester fidèle à ce personnage romantico-décadent qu'il avait construit de ses propres mains et donné en spectacle à tant de témoins, au cours de sa longue correspondance avec eux. Ce fut une façon de montrer qu'il pouvait lui aussi, tout comme Mreule, passer à l'acte en émigrant dans une terre inconnue. Avançant cette hypothèse, nous avons conscience de rester très en-deçà de la frontière de l'explication psycho-médicale pour laquelle le raptus suicidaire s'origine de causes infiniment plus intriquées et aléatoires, et de nous en tenir à la surface phénoménique du comportement du désespéré."²²

[Perhaps suicide also offered him the means of remaining loyal to his romantic-decadent character which he himself had created and had paraded to so many witnesses during his long correspondence with them. It was a way of showing that he too, like Mreule, could act by emigrating to an unknown land. By putting forward this hypothesis, we realise that we are not going so far as the psycho-medical explanation, according to which the suicidal *raptus* has a far more intricate and haphazard origin. And we are aware of remaining on the phenomenal surface of the desperate man's behaviour.]

*His brother Gino emigrated to New York and reportedly was murdered. The critics tend to concur on this. However, the poet Franco Fortini imparted to the present author in personal conversation, that Gino too had in fact also committed suicide in New York - a fact that was kept within the Michelstaedter family. Fortini added that Carlo himself had carved the granite tombstone for his brother Gino's grave. This grave is to be found in the Jewish cemetery at Gorizia, which cemetery lies on the Yugoslav side of the present frontier. I mention this unconfirmed supposition concerning Gino's suicide because it would seem to bear out what Ada Nager²³ has to say concerning the social, psychological and cultural implications of Jewishness in Hapsburgian Italy. But it could also be a peculiar family trait with psychological causes that have remained undisclosed heretofore.

In order to understand Michelstaedter, one has to come to terms with his urgent quest for the absolute, which is synonymous with perfection, in short, with the impossible. The very fact that Michelstaedter himself gradually realised that his dream was unable to be consummated, provides a key to understanding his personal drama, his text.

Maryse Jeuland-Meynaud provides some relevant observations in this regard.²³ She points out that this obsession for the absolute is also reflected in letters, inasmuch as he strives for an absolute immediacy and intimacy with those with whom he cannot be. One of the attributes of the "uomo della persuasione", or "uomo ammaestrato" is his ability to transcend, as it were, time and space, thereby allowing him to be close to that which is physically far removed from him. Michelstaedter says:

"L'uomo ammaestrato [e cioè colui che è riuscito a divenire padrone di se stesso] . . . vede le cose lontane come [se fossero] vicine, . . ." [Brackets mine.] ²⁴

[The man who has become master of himself . . . sees things distant as though they were near.]

In his letters to his family, Michelstaedter goes into exhaustive detail about the most intimate aspects of his life, and in so doing, it would seem that he negates the distance between himself, living in Florence, and his family living in Gorizia. The same is also true of his correspondence with his friends, Gaetano Chiavacci and Nino Paternolli. In this regard, Jeuland-Meynaud observes:

"Ce penchant non plus résistant à l'analyse a constitué un entraînement idéal pour percer le moi caché d'autrui. De sa propre intimité psychique, Carlo passe au moi secret de ses interlocuteurs, mettant ainsi en place un troisième plan de specularité dont la surface réfléchissante est prévue pour renvoyer à l'autre sa propre image. L'institution d'un autre dispositif réflexif répond au désir de l'écrivain de créer entre son moi et celui du destinataire un espace d'intimité où se retrouver et communier dans l'absolu de la connaissance réciproque dictée par l'amour ou l'amitié, pour une interpénétration des vérités individuelles d'où naîtra la Vérité."²⁵

[This penchant for analysis that became irresistible, constituted an ideal training for penetrating the hidden ego of others. From his own psychic intimacy, Carlo goes on to the secret ego of his interlocutors, thereby establishing a third level of enquiry, the reflective surface of which is designed to mirror his own image to the other. The setting up of another reflective device corresponds to the writer's wish to create an area of intimacy between his own self and that of the addressee where to meet and to commune in the absolute of reciprocal knowledge dictated by love or friendship, for an interpenetration of individual truths whence Truth will arise.]

and:

"De son corps, de ses fringales et gourmandises (une irrésistible passion pour les douceurs bien significative à un oeil averti), des soins de propreté qu'il prend, de son régime alimentaire et de ses exercices musculaires, de ses ennuis intestinaux et des troubles répétés d'une santé qui ne fut pas toujours aussi bonne qu'il veut lui-même le donner à croire, de ses médications, il parle avec la plus grande liberté, sans crainte d'en rappeler les manifestations physiologiques les moins valorisantes, tels les troubles et les incontinences de la descente digestive qui le font courir à travers Florence à la recherche des lieux dits d'aisance. Ces mentions nombreuses dans les lettres à la famille sont tout autant le signe d'habitudes naturalistes résiduelles que la marque du haut degré d'intimité existant entre le jeune homme et les siens, et de la conscience qu'on ne peut exister sans être ce que l'on est et sans le faire connaître pour l'exhaustivité de la représentation."²⁶

[He speaks with utmost liberty about his body, about his cravings, and about his overfondness for certain foods - (an irresistible passion for sweetmeats, very significant to the trained eye), - about his habits of hygiene, about his diet and muscular exercises, about his digestive troubles, about the repeated trouble with his health which is never as good as he himself wishes to have it believed, and about his medication. He has no qualms about mentioning the most unseemly physiological manifestations such as the troubles and incontinencies of his digestive tract which have him running across Florence searching for so-called public conveniences. The numerous times he mentions these aspects in letters to his family, are as much an indication of residual natural habits as of the indication of the high degree of intimacy that exists between the young man and his relatives, and of the awareness that one cannot exist without being what one is, without making it known but for the fact that it would be impossible to give an exhaustive representation of it.]

This quest for the absolute is also evident throughout his work, and we have here above, the recognition on the part of Jeuland Meynaud of Michelstaedter's overriding concern with truth and the need to communicate it even to the point of banality. Michelstaedter seems to have been absorbed by the need to communicate his distress and formed very close human relationships which provided him with a panacea.

Significantly, she also mentions that he needed to convey an image of himself as a healthy being, which was often contrary to fact. Also, the degree of intimacy which he enjoyed with his family which included the discussion of his bodily functions denote even on a superficial level, a complexity that would merit psychological investigation. Whereas such an investigation is beyond the scope of this essay, his familial relationships and the inevitable psychological repercussions are factors which should be borne in mind.

However, here we are primarily concerned with the more obvious manifestations of this quest for honesty and the absolute. For example, Michelstaedter expresses his yearning to be liberated from space and time as follows:

"... [M]a la sua persona non è nel saper mangiare, bere, dormire, pesare, camminare più o meno bene, non è la persona che invecchia: egli [l'uomo persuaso] sa 'anche' tutte queste cose. E pel suo sapere egli è fuori del tempo, dello spazio, della necessità continua, egli è libero; *assoluto* ... ma nell' Assoluto egli ha la Libertà ..."²⁷

[... [B]ut his person does not consist of knowing how to eat, to drink, to sleep, to weigh himself to walk more or less well. It is not the person that grows older: the man of conviction knows all these things 'as well'. And by virtue of his knowing, he is beyond time, and space, beyond continual necessity. He is free; *absolute* ... but in the Absolute he has Liberty. ...]

When Michelstaedter says: "Ma nel suo Assoluto egli ha il Fine"²⁸, he reveals the frontiers within which "l'uomo persuaso" operates. And in the light of Michelstaedter's own absolutism, life in its imperfection as well as objective reality could not accommodate him, leaving death by suicide as the only alternative. (The alternative offered by Svevo will be discussed in due course). Michelstaedter reveals an acute awareness of an insoluble dilemma, namely, one of striving for something that will forever remain unattainable:

"Io salirò sulla montagna - l'altezza mi chiama, voglio averla [,] l'ascendo - la domino; ma la montagna come la posseggo? Ben son alto sulla pianura e sul mare; e vedo il largo orizzonte che è della montagna; ma tutto ciò non è mio: non è in me quanto vedo ... le onde si fendono davanti all'uomo che nuota; se bevo il salso, se esulto come un delfino - se m'annego - ma ancora il mare non lo posseggo: sono *solo e diverso* in mezzo al mare." [Stress Michelstaedter's.]²⁹

[I shall ascend the mountain - the height beckons me, I want to have it, I ascend it - I dominate it; but how do I possess the mountain? Even though I am high on the plain and on the sea; and I see the wide horizon from the mountain; but all this is not mine: what I see is not in me . . . the waves swell in front of the man who swims; if I drink the potion, if I frolic like a dolphin - if I submerge myself - yet I still do not possess the sea: I am *alone and apart* in the middle of the sea.]

And, of course, what he is saying here is as true of man in a broader universal sense as it is of Michelstaedter himself. There is another important factor which we have mentioned in Chapter One, a factor which is inescapable, indeed quintessential in studying both Michelstaedter and Svevo. We have indicated that both Svevo and Michelstaedter were Jewish. Besides the obvious cultural and societal implications, the fact of being Jewish in the more ostensibly tolerant atmosphere of Hapsburgian Italy, as opposed to Austria proper, had certain psychological consequences. As Ada Neiger points out:

"Egli [cioè l'ebreo, ossia Michelstaedter] si trova quindi in una situazione conflittuale riconducibile alla tipica condizione dell'ebreo emancipato, travagliato dal dilemma: fedeltà ai propri modelli culturali o adeguamento alle consuetudini di vita della società egemone.

Michelstaedter si allontanerà dall'osservanza della tradizione ebraica integrandosi nel contempo nella circostante società cattolica, inserendosi cioè nel contesto politico e sociale dominante senza tuttavia assimilarvisi passivamente con l'abdicazione ai propri modelli culturali."³⁰

[He [that is, the Jew or Michelstaedter] therefore finds himself in a conflict situation which can be traced back to the typical condition of the emancipated Jew, assailed by the dilemma: loyalty to his own cultural models or adaptation to the customs of the dominant society.

Michelstaedter would remove himself from the observance of the Jewish tradition simultaneously integrating himself in the surrounding Catholic society, i.e., associating himself with the dominant social and political context without, however, becoming passively assimilated by means of renouncing his own cultural models.]

It appears, then, that in order to transcend the social and psychological tensions inherent in being Jewish in a tolerant society, Michelstaedter sought refuge in unbridled individuality. In a more oppressive and unrelenting society, opposition to such oppression makes for

cohesion and adherence to Jewish traditions. When a society is more tolerant, the individual, as was certainly the case with Michelstaedter, is forced to define his own role more accurately because he is now part of that very society, no longer excluded from it, and consequently feels the pressure to compete within a milieu which is, if anything merely quasi-alien. Neiger attributes Michelstaedter's existential impasse to his "inserimento sociale", which condition in turn impelled him to "... contare esclusivamente sulle proprie risorse personali"³¹ "... to count exclusively on his own personal resources." In a situation such as that which Michelstaedter found himself in, Gorizia at the turn of this century, he was assailed by conflicting loyalties, social, religious, cultural and linguistic loyalties. It would seem that one way of dispensing with his inherent and inherited conflict, was his recourse to absolutism, something that would obviate the need to be partisan in any way. His firm belief in the self, in himself as a vehicle for his absolutism would seem to have provided him with a solution. The fact that his absolutism was impracticable provided him, however, with a crisis which in every sense was existential, i.e., it concerned the way in which he lived and determined significantly the course of that life. He and his ideal of the "uomo della persuasione" seem to reflect the dilemma of the individual who wants to remain such at all costs. The inability to adapt to the realities of life, morally reprehensible as they may be, proves to be fatal as was the case with Michelstaedter. The individual, no matter how worthy his ideals, may himself fall victim to those ideals if the ideals do not take cognisance of, and embrace the myriad of imponderable contradictions with which life is fraught. Svevo's Zeno is the repository for those contradictions and survives because he is unable to take ideals seriously.

Michelstaedter "transcends" his personal dilemma, as it were, and universalises it. Yet the link between the personal and the creative process is less elaborate in Michelstaedter's La persuasione e 'a rettorica than it is in Svevo's La coscienza di Zeno. Michelstaedter's creative process is characterised on the one hand, primarily by his own very personal

dilemma with the outcome being his devastatingly frank treatment of the human condition and its paradoxes. Furthermore, it is characterised by his refusal to accept the moral compromise of which human life consists. In Svevo, the moral compromise is indispensable to that artist's work - a novel full of grey areas such as do not exist for Michelstaedter. Here it is opportune to mention that Svevo's first novel, Una vita, written during his youth, also portrayed the protagonist's death by suicide. Una vita is a stark and well-disguised simplification compared to the myriad of complexities, subtleties, and contradictions that characterise La coscienza di Zeno. In contradistinction, Michelstaedter's conviction pervades his work because of his very "personalised" creativity, i.e., the very close, indeed inextricable, identification between the author and his work, in short, a total subjectivity, a conspicuous lack of "distancing" on the part of the artist from his creation. One might even be tempted to speak of Michelstaedter's work La persuasione e la rettorica, as his personal dilemma. His letters bear this out, whereas in Svevo, the latter's letters do not provide a running commentary on Ettore Schmitz, the man, at least not to the same extent. Svevo's letters concern themselves more with day-to-day matters. His letters do not have the therapeutic function, at least not to the same degree, as do Michelstaedter's. Svevo's La coscienza di Zeno, however, is by his own admission an elaborate therapy in artistic form. *In short, there is undoubtedly a greater detachment between Ettore Schmitz and Italo Svevo, Schmitz's literary *persona*, his artistic proxy or artistic *alter ego*. We must note here that this is in itself a convincing indication of Svevo's maturity and Michelstaedter's relative lack thereof.

Svevo's Jewishness seems to have caused him fewer problems, or at least he seems to have resolved the issue differently. This would appear to be due in no small measure to the fact that Trieste was and is a big city in which being Jewish was not equatable to being a

*That is to say, the artist has moulded and fashioned his "materia", his "matter", into an autonomous entity, as it were, readily distinct from its creator and from the latter's personal, subjective, immediate, and identifiable "self".

conspicuous anomaly, whereas in Gorizia, a small town by comparison, being Jewish would perforce have made Michelstaedter more aware of his religious origins. Trieste had a lively Jewish cultural tradition and a milieu which was often bourgeois or upper-bourgeois. And it is into such circumstances that Svevo married, viz., into the Veneziani family which was of Jewish descent. Svevo foresaw the limitations of bourgeois norms and attacked them at the very roots. He was not, however, attacking Jews specifically, but merely the norms to which the most powerful class in society, the bourgeoisie in general, was adhering. Also in this regard, it would appear that Svevo transcended his personal station in society of successful businessman, criticising the class to which he himself appertained. But he criticised in such manner as to both expose and define a view of modern man.

Michelstaedter too, does the same. He too criticises man, and uses the norms of people who, like himself, appertain to the bourgeoisie. However the fundamental difference between Michelstaedter and Svevo in this regard is that the former's criticism seems to be "reactionary", and inflexible in its extreme and uncompromising posture, whereas Svevo's criticism is mellowed, not absolutist in tone or nature. The word "compromise" itself has a special significance in Svevo, viz., the ability to compromise, indeed tendency or habit of continual compromise. This Zeno does incessantly. It is essentially a form of comportmental reaction, so to speak, which enfeebles man, rendering him a weakened being who should not, according to the dictates of nature, be allowed to survive. Yet man has survived and it is thus the kaleidoscopic nature of Svevo's criticism which, although not in any manner so dramatic or extreme in expression as Michelstaedter's, is all the more telling and condemnatory precisely because of its extreme subtlety.

In this regard, a cardinal observation concerning Michelstaedter has been made in this regard by Jeuland-Meynaud:

"N'oublions pas qu'il était logicien, assez du moins pour ne pas souffrir en lui les incartades de l'irrationnel et de la non-cohérence. Contrairement à Svevo, assagi et pacifié par la vie, il ne put être l'homme du compromis existentiel."³²

[Let us not forget that he was a logician enough at least not to suffer the vagaries of the irrational and of incoherence. Contrary to Svevo, calmed and pacified by life he never could be a man for existential compromise.]

Michelstaedter is limited by logic, logic being an "intellectual cocoon" that could provide a safe world in which to operate, a world which safely, though in a limited way, transcends the contradictory nature of experience - it obviates the need for experience. Logic provides Michelstaedter with a "controlled environment", one in which life makes sense and does not have to confront the contradictory nature of experience with all its emotive elements. Jeuland-Meynaud's observation is all the more acute in that it also points out that Michelstaedter, unable to cope with suffering and the lack of coherence in life, seeks refuge in pure logic, and the theoretical exposition of his vision, a realm in which he stoically encapsulates himself thereby obliterating all compromise with life as it is apprehended, pursued, and lived by human beings. Michelstaedter is also idealistic, and as we noted, has an unbridled belief in the possibility of perfection, as an extension of his belief in the absolute. And even if he does not consider perfection realisable in or attainable by other beings, he most assuredly does attempt to sustain and apply this belief to himself - a belief, moreover, which he aspires to translate into reality. Simply put, these are the terms within which Michelstaedter operates. These are also the terms, in the final analysis, within which one should judge Michelstaedter, i.e., his own terms, because they are the ones which can be explained in the light of history, psychology, his cultural orientation, and his biographical data, and they are *in se* indispensable keys to a fuller understanding of his text. It must also be borne in mind that these factors of biography, history, and psychology do not minimise what Michelstaedter is attempting to convey to his reader. On the contrary, they elucidate, reveal, and amplify his thoughts and writing because the dichotomy between his aspirations

and his inability to fulfill those aspirations become clearer.

Jeuland-Meynaud's point is important in that it emphasises what we had mentioned earlier, viz., that Svevo as a novelist had a wider range of experience and a larger canvas at his disposal, and was able to depict a situation which from the outset was more complex, i.e., the commercial city of Trieste with its variety of ethnic and political and cultural facets.

Svevo would of course be subject to the same analysis in terms of the historical, social and psychological influences that were exerted on him, but their outcome would seem to have been less dramatic and less extreme. And it is here that we need to be reminded yet again of the fundamental difference between the two writers, namely, that Svevo rejects idealism and indeed sees perfection and the quest for it (which is obviously a form of idealism) as not only undesirable and impracticable, but even dangerous. Paradoxically, it is by means of this very divergence that the two writers would appear to be concurring. That is to say, what Svevo arrives at through the negation of 'idealism, Michelstaedter arrives at through extreme idealism. Svevo compromises, and sees life as a series of compromises. He apprehends and expresses the futility of idealism and the impossibility of the attainment of perfection, or "health" to use his metaphor. In a sense, Svevo, to a greater extent than Michelstaedter, is more detached in that in La coscienza di Zeno, he dispassionately describes the "malattia". Where Svevo is dispassionate in his criticism and exposition of "malattia", Michelstaedter is passionate in his description of the "uomo della retorica, his metaphor for "malattia". He diagnoses Man through the protagonist Zeno, and watches the demise of humanity in the form of a universal suicide from which Man may one day emerge free of all malady. And in fact, Michelsteadter too ascribes a similar salutary attribution to death.

Both see death not as an end, but as something that is potentially regenerative, renovative

health. Paradoxically, they are both idealists, both harbouring respective notions of perfection, albeit those notions are intangible. Michelstaedter seems disappointed in the fact that perfection is intangible, whereas Svevo seems to have resigned himself to the fact, and is even comforted by the inevitability of death. They both perceive life and Man as being the objects and subjects of ceaseless illusions and delusions, and it is precisely against this that both authors, each in his own way, rebel. The fundamental difference between the two writers is not so much the conclusions (relatively the same) at which they arrive respectively, as it is their method and their approach. This may at first appear oversimplified, yet it is necessary to place it here as a point of departure which can be put to the test when analysing their respective texts.

At this juncture, we must continue our study whilst recalling concepts which we have mentioned in Chapter One: perfection, authenticity and liberty, the possibility or impossibility of attaining these, and indeed, the desirability or undesirability of their attainment. These concepts in both writers' works are metaphorically expressed by the frequent debate concerning "salute/malattia", as we have it in Svevo's La coscienza di Zeno and "vita/morte" as we find it in Michelstaedter. The illusory nature of knowledge is explored by Svevo who uses psycho-analysis as his *exemplum*. He considers modern psycho-analysis as an object of artistic and intellectual enquiry, and he deliberately mis-uses and parodies it as a means of contemporary "enlightenment". In Svevo's view, psycho-analysis is ostensibly a method used to "cure" the maladies of the mind, and it is therefore a technique used in maintaining an illusion, viz., the false security that health, mental or physical, exists, is meaningful, and is worth striving for. This is one of the central themes in Svevo's La coscienza di Zeno.

Michelstaedter, on the other hand, openly debates and casts doubt upon the very concept of knowledge. Indeed, he poses the question whether gnosis exists or can exist. His debate

centres around the query as to whether knowledge *in se* may have intrinsic worth, or whether in fact it may merely be a further manifestation of self-deception and false security. In fact, Michelstaedter goes a step further. He asserts implicitly that this self-deception, this false security putatively endows life with a meaning which, in Michelstaedter's view, life does not intrinsically have.

Ada Neiger sheds light by providing us with an explanation of this virtual obsession with "security". She says:

"Se non riesce a vincere la propria mancanza di sicurezza, l'ebreo emancipato [com'erano gli Ebrei in Italia più che altrove] può tuttavia mascherarla con l'attivismo esasperato, l'atteggiamento progressista, la disposizione a sconvolgere, ove fosse necessario, le istituzioni tradizionali." [Brackets mine.]³¹

[If he does not succeed in conquering his own lack of security, the emancipated Jew [as would be the case in Italy more than elsewhere] can nonetheless mask it with exasperated activity, a progressive attitude and a disposition to undermine the traditional institutions wherever it may be necessary.]

The dialectic inherent in both Svevo and Michelstaedters' works, revolves, as we have noted, around the concepts of perfection, authenticity, and liberty. These concepts in turn can be viewed as the keys to liberty, or at least can be viewed as notions which Svevo and Michelstaedter employ to undermine their own need for psychological security, a need felt all the more so due to their relatively precarious situation in society as Jews. They both strive for something that renders innocuous the strictures, real or imaginary, imposed on them by the society and the historical moment in which they find themselves. These concepts are common to both writers, either directly or by clear implication. Each of these concepts, in turn, can be further refined into elements which can be related to the two writers' respective texts. In short, the concepts that are dealt with are merely expressed in each writer's individual terms. For example, perfection and the debate it generates, find expression in Svevo in his study and interpretation of Darwin's ideas of evolution and can

be viewed as a Svevian reaction against the Nietzschean ideal whereas Michelstaedter's concept of perfection echoes the Nietzschean ideal.*

In order to clarify the points of convergence and the points of divergence in Michelstaedter and Svevo the notions of perfection, authenticity and liberty can be distinguished in their respective modes of thought as follows: In Svevo the concept of perfection is present by the constant rejection of the ideal of perfection in that Zeno is the embodiment of imperfection. He strives for perfection or "salute" (health) but never attains it. Those in the novel who aspire to perfection within the bourgeois norms of society do not survive. Guido Speier embodies the ideal of perfection and health as does Dr S, in that they believe that health is indeed attainable, but what they are in fact doing is perpetuating a dangerous ideal; they do not recognise the malady that is the foundation of their bourgeois norms, norms that led the bourgeoisie into the disaster of the First World War. Zeno's obsession with health is the proof of the malady. If one is healthy one does not seek health because one already has it. But, if one recognises that one is diseased, one seeks health and that is precisely what Zeno does, only he resigns himself to the fact that he is fundamentally diseased and in doing so realises that his malady is the malady of society at large. He is a microcosm of modern man. Zeno is himself a study of disease and therefore of imperfection.

In Michelstadter the concept of perfection is treated differently, yet like Svevo the word perfection is never mentioned, but implied and denoted by words such as "assoluto" and

*It must be borne in mind that in the first three or four decades of this century, Italian literary culture had been powerfully influenced by Gabriele D'Annunzio's works which embodied much of the Nietzschean view of life. D'Annunzio, indirectly influenced by Nietzsche, but more directly with pagan and mythic motifs and themes, evinced in his works the belief that the individual can and should create his destiny; the destruction of conventional; traditional modes of thought; and a morality in which the individual was the creator of his own morality - a "superman", as it were, who, if he did not refute it entirely, cared little for conventional morality.

"persuaso". His "uomo della persuasione" embodies his concept of perfection and his "uomo della rettorica" embodies his concept of imperfection or modern man's disease, the same disease that Svevo perceives and for which Zeno is a symbol. Michelstaedter believes in the ideal of perfection, Svevo does not. Michelstaedter seems to believe that perfection is, in fact, attainable whereas Svevo does not.

Michelstaedter like Svevo recognises that man is fundamentally diseased. Michelstaedter rejects modern man because of his imperfection, whereas Svevo resigns himself to the inevitability of modern man's disease and hence his imperfection.

Authenticity in Svevo is present in the characterisation of Zeno who is "authentically" human, actually and veritably sodden with contradictions and illusions about himself. He is of course, unspeakably mediocre and average as well. Svevo's Zeno accepts the world as it is and the creation of Zeno on the part of Svevo is an attempt at an authentic re-creation of a real life situation as enacted in Zeno's life and mind. Zeno is not a hero, a fact which he accepts and he becomes the quintessential anti-hero. Zeno has no will to speak of, and when he does make attempts to exercise it to his own advantage it "backfires" on him and he finds himself reacting to circumstances imposed upon him from outside or by circumstances that he has created by default, not by intention nor by the clear and consequent exercise of his will. (The absurd situation with Ada vs Augusta comes to mind as well as Zeno's feeble attempts at playing the violin, the death of his father, his obsession with time and his half-hearted attempts at giving up smoking). The authenticity in Svevo relies upon a credible re-creation of life and portrayal of the character of Zeno.

In Michelstaedter the authenticity which he alludes to has its origin in the striving for perfection, in the exercise of the will. (This idea is very much akin to the Nietzschean

concept of the "Wille zur Macht" or, the power over oneself to become one's own god, the projection of the self to a higher state of being). In order for a high perfect state of being to occur, Michelstaedter expresses the need for the "autenticità dell'essere", the authenticity of being in which the "uomo della persuasione" has to dispense, through the exercise of will power, with notions which invests life with meaning in societal terms, namely, time, love, religion, knowledge, to mention but a few. Michelstaedter seems to be advocating a moral and spiritual purity which would be synonymous with perfection and which in turn would lead to liberty. The stoic honesty of Michelstaedter's "uomo della persuasione" has an aim, namely "l'assoluto" which in other words can be expressed as man simply being divested of all that which is illusory, of all that which imbues life with a meaning which Michelstaedter maintains it does not intrinsically have. Authenticity of being then in his view, leads to a state of perfection. This is a significant and fundamental difference between Svevo and Michelstaedter, which in fact contributes to a greater understanding of their respective texts: Svevo relies on an authentic re-creation in artistic form, of life, whereas Michelstaedter imposes an ideal of authenticity in the form of the "uomo della persuasione".

In Svevo, the myriad of contradictions and attempts at a meaningful existence or "healthy" existence to which Zeno continually falls victim equally render notions such as time, love and knowledge absolutely meaningless. The vagaries of Zeno's love life, for example, show how elusive and transient the idea of love can be. Michelstaedter's "uomo della rettorica" serves as an illustration of the inner contradictions in modern man's behaviour as does Svevo's Zeno and both serve to point out and undermine the premises of, and claims to, legitimacy upon which modern man bases his existence.

Knowledge or *gnosis*, are illusory for both Svevo and Michelstaedter in that knowledge would claim to be a means of objectifying reality and creating a certainty which does not

exist and hence perpetuates inauthenticity and illusion. One can view psychology in its Freudian guise as an attempt at providing a body of knowledge that could ostensibly cure neurosis, in which instance Zeno's case history would seem to divest the therapy of any credibility and hence cast doubt upon the very concept of *gnosis*.

Michelstaedter sees knowledge or gnosis as one of the tools of the "uomo della retorica", as a means of making modern man feel secure in his illusory world and in fact says that man puts himself in a cognitive situation and creates knowledge.

"Hanno bisogno del 'sapere' e il sapere è costituito. Il 'sapere' è per sé stesso scopo della vista, ci sono le parti del sapere, e la via al sapere, uomini che lo cercano, uomini che lo danno, si compra, si vende, con tanto, in tanto tempo, con tanta fatica. Così *fiorisce la retorica accanto alla vita*. Gli uomini si mettono in *posizione conoscitiva e fanno il sapere*." [Stresses Michelstaedter's.]³⁴

[They need 'knowledge' and knowledge is constructed. 'Knowledge' is an end in itself in relation to life, there are parts of knowledge, and one buys the road to knowledge, men that seek it, men that give it, it is sold with a lot, in much time, with a lot of effort. In this way *retoric flourishes in life*. Men put themselves in *a position of power derived from knowledge*.]

Hence it can be said that both Svevo and Michelstaedter have rendered meaningless certain notions, certain "securities" such as time, love and knowledge which are seen conventionally as absolute and as endowing life with meaning. Michelstaedter does so using a theorhetical, idealistic approach and Svevo does so using an experiential approach. In other words, Michelstaedter says that normative absolutes do not exist and illustrates this idea by means of the exposition of a view of life, whereas Svevo points out that normative absolutes do not exist by means of the illustration of the way Zeno leads his life, or to put it more succinctly, has his life led for him.

As explained above, liberty in Michelstaedter is arrived at by the acquisition of perfection and authenticity. However, Michelstaedter's view of liberty seems to be the liberation from all earthly strictures, indeed he would seem to advocate a higher state of

consciousness which renews man and enables him to see the Truth. His "uomo della rettorica" is merely an exercise in exposing the mendacity inherent in conventional modes of living. His La persuasione e la rettorica is a constant progression towards liberty, towards the freedom from enslavement to, and dependence on, life. He implies that if liberty means death, so be it. In Svevo liberty is obtained by the acceptance of disease. Zeno frees himself from the need to be healthy and from enslavement to an ideal. Michelstaedter attains a freedom, an inner liberty by means of the rejection of life, or at least freedom from a normative understanding of life, whereas Svevo attains a freedom through an acceptance of life. Michelstaedter rejects life because of its imperfections, whereas Svevo's Zeno accepts life despite its inherent imperfections. Here again, the comparison serves to illustrate fundamental themes common to both writers, themes which may otherwise have remained dormant. Their questioning, the issues they raise, are similar if not the same, and the resolution is the same or strikingly similar, but the road they traverse is significantly different.

Both Michelstaedter and Svevo use words in full awareness of the paradoxical use they put them to. Michelstaedter uses the words "vita" and "morte" (life and death) in a specific way. For Michelstaedter life as lived by the "uomo della rettorica" is spiritual death, life lived merely as a postponement of death. Whereas life for Michelstaedter is worthy of the term only for as long as his ideal of the "uomo della persuasione" can be sustained. The full intensity of life makes itself felt when death is a chosen course of action, an exercise of free will, not when death is feared, timidly.

Svevo's use of "salute" and "malattia", "health" and "disease", are likewise used in a paradoxical vein. Zeno strives for health by attempting to conform to societal norms of what health is supposed to be. Not only is his striving for health a symptom of his disease, society's norms are themselves diseased. The conventional notion of health is

thereby undermined in the same way that Michelstaedter undermines the conventional understanding of the word "life". Svevo and Michelstaedter would seem to concur that true life, or a life worthy of being lived (*degnata di essere vissuta*) can only be obtained by means of the destruction of that which is diseased or imperfect. Whereas Svevo lives the imperfection of life through his character Zeno, he does not provide a "uomo della persuasione", which is Michelstaedter's antidote to the "uomo della rettorica"; Svevo provides no heroic ideal; he only provides the mediocrity of his character Zeno. In a biographical vein, the question which then arises is whether Michelstaedter's self-destruction, in consequence of his ideal, is not the recognition of his own disease, the recognition that he cannot live up to his own ideals and that he cannot contemplate compromise with a diseased world as Svevo's Zeno is able to do.

The fundamental difference between Zeno and Michelstaedter's "uomo della rettorica" is that Zeno is aware of disease and the "uomo della rettorica" is not. The "uomo della rettorica" thinks he is perfect by his own definition and in this way the "uomo della rettorica" is akin to Guido Speier who thinks of himself as the embodiment of health whereas in fact he is the apogee of disease. Svevo's Zeno is more advanced than the "uomo della rettorica" in that he consciously accepts disease although he deludes himself periodically that health is in fact possible. Zeno is comparable furthermore, to the "uomo della rettorica" in that he is devoid of an ideal or would modify his will in such a way so as to survive while attempting to justify his deeds under a veneer of moral rectitude.

The question which each writer poses to the reader by implication is whether health and life, in Svevo's and Michelstaedter's understanding of those terms, are indeed attainable and hence whether perfection, authenticity and liberty are indeed attainable. This aspect will be discussed in the next chapter.

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- ²²Jeuland-Meynaud, M., op.cit., p. 107 ff.

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²⁴Michelstaedter, C., La persuasione e la rettorica, p. 166.

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²⁷Michelstaedter, C., La persuasione e la rettorica, p. 94 ff.

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³⁴Michelstaedter, C., La persuasione e la rettorica, p.100.

CHAPTER THREE

"There must be no more mystery. The men must descend into this dark well and then come up again saying they have found nothing."¹

In the previous chapter reference was made to "perfection" / "perfezione", "authenticity"/ "autenticità", and "liberty" / "libertà" as being the essential elements in comparing Michelstaedter and Svevo. The aim of this chapter is to explore the implications and manifestations of these three concepts in the works of the two writers.

We have indicated that Michelstaedter strives for a self-defined perfection, whilst Svevo rejects the very concept as being unattainable. For Michelstaedter, perfection is found in the ability of the human being to divest himself of a series of dependencies, or mechanisms, be they physical or intellectual, which endow life with meaning and which buttress an unquestioning attitude towards life. His conviction is that perfection in these terms leads to an authenticity which culminates in ultimate liberty.

"I bisogni, le necessità della vita, non sono per lui necessità, poiché non é necessario che sia continuata la vita che, bisognosa di tutto, si rivela non esser *vita*." [Stress Michelstaedter's.]²

[The needs, the necessities of *life* are not necessities for him since it is not necessary [for him] that life be continued inasmuch as life, being needy of everything, reveals itself to be anything but life.]

Svevo, on the other hand, manifests a great degree of maturity and perspective and, unlike Michelstaedter, is non-prescriptive. Svevo observes:

"Nella mia mancanza di uno sviluppo marcato in qualsiasi voglia senso, io sono quell'uomo . . . [l'uomo che lotta per supremazia] e sto aspettando sapendo di non esser altro che un abbozzo. Il presente può avere il futuro in germe non in azione."³

[Lacking any marked development in whatever sense, I am that man . . . [who struggles for supremacy] and I am waiting, knowing that I am nothing other than a sketch. The present can have within it the seeds of the future but cannot be the future in action.]

The last sentence of this passage is particularly significant to our discussion, because it is in clear contradistinction to Michelstaedter's particular conception of "life" and "non-life", and thus provides us with a noteworthy indication of the relative maturity of the two writers.

Svevo humbly acknowledges the fact that the present carries merely the seeds of the future - for the present cannot be the future as well.*

For Michelstaedter, the ideal is for the individual to transcend the limitations imposed by space and time. What is even more significant is the fact that both writers seem to be addressing the same question, namely the attainability or non-attainability of perfection, or, to be more specific, the practical possibility or impossibility of realising one's ideals during one's lifetime. Michelstaedter, by stretching, almost ignoring, the objectively manifest limits of possibility, wants this life to be more than it can be. It becomes clear then that "possibility" exceeds objective assessments and is determined more by his will, than by a process of reasoning and deduction. That is will, served by a rigid logic. It can be reasonably assumed therefore, that Michelstaedter thinks in "absolutist" terms, absolutist in that the will of the individual does not compromise itself with that which falls outside that will. Svevo recognises the imperfection, or better, the imperfectibility of life, in fact both writers do, but only Svevo comes to terms with it, whereas Michelstaedter does not seem to be able to do so. To reiterate, both writers do indeed acknowledge the imperfection of life, and it is a question which utterly absorbs them both, but each assesses the phenomenon, as it were, and arrives at a separate and independent conclusion.

*See Svevo's essay entitled "La Corruzione Dell'Anima", in Opera Omnia, Dall'Oglio, Milano, 1966, p. 641.

As we have noted in Chapter Two, the concept of perfection was seen in relation to the way Svevo and Michelstaedter each in their own manner viewed the concept of perfection. In Michelstaedter, it is indeed an ideal, whereas in Svevo it would seem to remain a concept. Svevo, in his discourse on Darwinism, reveals how the English scientist influenced his thinking. Svevo asserts that man has evolved into a "perfect" being of sorts, but that that perfection is illusory and fraudulent. Man, according to Svevo, may have become a creature perfectly adapted to his physical and social environment, but he in no way implies that the perfection acquired in terms his environment is accompanied by a perfection in terms of his philosophical / ethical stance in life. In the following passage, Svevo expresses ideas which seem to refute or oppose the prevailing D'Annunzian / Nietzschean ideals, and he argues that concepts and ideas are merely extensions of Man's ability to manufacture "tools" or instruments with which to dominate his environment:

"La bestia nuova era nata e le sue membra invece che perfezionarsi quali ordigni divennero capaci di maneggiare quelli che essa creò. Anzi una volta che gli ordigni erano nati le sue membra non poterono più mutarsi e come gli altri animali si riprodussero sempre uguali a se stessi per la cessazione in loro di ogni conato avendo perduta l'anima, se l'uomo benché sempre torvo e malcontento si riproducesse uguale per poter maneggiare gli ordigni che s'erano cristallizzati. E così nacquero i grandi popoli. . . Alcuni di questi ordigni erano idee . . . E non doveva mai venire l'epoca in cui il tempo si fermi e i suoi ordigni opera della sua anima non più si sviluppino?"⁴

[The new creature was born and its limbs, rather than perfecting themselves, became instruments capable of handling that which the limbs created. In fact, once the instruments were born, his limbs could no longer mutate and since other animals always reproduced themselves in an image of themselves, they lost their souls because of the cessation in them of every effort. However, Man, although forever surly and discontented, always reproduced himself so as to manage the instruments that had become crystallised. And thus the great peoples were born . . . Some of these instruments were ideas . . . And was there never an era in which time stopped and his instruments, the product of his soul, therefore not able to develop further?]

This is an essential passage in understanding Svevo and his creation, Zeno. His tone in this passage is detached, and it contains also a sense of foreboding because he implies that Man will cease to develop and that there must be an end to the world. (His famous last chapter

in La coscienza di Zeno obviously comes to mind in which a man, more diseased than the rest of humanity, manages to get to the centre of the earth, where he places a device which will blow up the world. And the world will wander like a nebulous mass through the universe). However, beyond that, he is saying that man, having developed as far as he can, has not only become a victim of his own creation, but that his very creation has taken on a life of its own and cannot be controlled. In the midst of all this, the individual has ceased to have any importance. Svevo considers the environment and other factors as being determinate in respect of man. Man for Svevo is the product of evolution. Let us compare this to what Svevo's contemporary, D'Annunzio says in La vergine delle rocce:

"Il mondo è la rappresentazione della sensibilità e del pensiero di pochi uomini superiori i quali lo hanno creato quindi ampliato e ornato del corso del tempo."⁵

[The world is the representation of the sensitivity and thought of a few superior men who created it [the world] and therefore have embellished it in the course of time.]

Here D'Annunzio takes the individual as his point of departure. As we have indicated earlier in Chapter II, Svevo's thinking to a significant and identifiable extent is in reaction to Nietzsche. In fact, it can and has been asserted that Svevean thought is the very antithesis of Nietzschean thought.⁶ It suffices to compare the following passage in Nietzsche to Svevo's Zeno to grasp the diametric opposition of two modes of thought. (Yet we note that this passage provides a definition of man which is almost identical to Michelstaedter's "l'uomo della persuasione"):

"Wenn die Macht gnädig wird und herabkommt ins Sichtbare: Schönheit heisse ich solches Herabkommen. Und von niemandem will ich so als von dir gerade Schönheit, du Gewaltiger : deine Güte sei deine letzte Selbst-Überwältigung."⁷

["When power grows gracious and descends into the visible, I call such descending beauty. And I desire beauty from no one as much as I desire it from you, you man of power. May your goodness be your ultimate self-overpowering."⁸

Emilio Cecchi makes the observation that Michelstaedter's thinking bears a remarkable resemblance to that of Nietzsche:

"Sembra quasi impossibile che, nonostante morisse giovanissimo, Michelstaedter con la sua robusta cultura germanica non avesse letto nulla di Nietzsche, al quale fra l'altro l'avvicinava l'amore della filosofia e della morale pre-socratica. Il fatto é che quanto conosco non lo cita mai. Mentre invece é probabile che ignorasse del tutto Kierkegaard. Ma i due scrittori gli sono fraterni . . ."

[It seems almost impossible, despite the fact that he died very young, that with his robust Germanic culture he had never read anything of Nietzsche, whom amongst other things, he approximates in the love for philosophy and pre-Socratic morality. The fact is that as far as I know he never cites him. Whereas it is probable that he completely ignored Kierkegaard. But the two writers resemble him very closely . . .]

The views of Michelstaedter and Svevo concerning human perfection, obviously bear implications and consequences directly involving the nature and manifestations or expressions of human existence. Someone who views life as a striving for perfection, is bound to live that life in a way unlike that of someone who does not consciously strive for perfection or indeed rejects the very concept of perfection. The way life is to be lived is a necessary corollary of one's view of human existence, and will perforce differ from another's view of such, despite social, historical and cultural differences. In Svevo's Zeno, we see a man very much the product of his times and his socio-economic class and who, in brief, is thereby a product of social evolution and historical forces, both of which are beyond his cognitive capacities to grasp even minimally.

Zeno is a "product", not a "creator", of civilisation. He is, like Michelstaedter, modern man. But Zeno is the "schlemiel", the "nebbish", the "inetto", the "nerd" and he survives precisely because of that peculiar human capability or facility to adapt. And thus *ipso facto*, (and with an irony beyond his own comprehension), he becomes "perfect". In Zeno's case, in contradistinction to that of Michelstaedter, will, desire, intent and conscious deliberation in regard to perfection, are all either non-existent, or at most, of insignificant consequence.

Zeno's mediocrity and his adaptability are the instruments which equip him for survival. In Zeno those instruments are not physical, rather they are derivatives of his mind, psychologically "sick" or not, as the case may be. With Michelstaedter, conversely, it is the quality of that survival which he, Michelstaedter, would seek to enhance by showing his disenchantment with what Modern Man has become. But it is essentially the description of that disenchantment which is also Svevo's intent by virtue of the his creation, formation, and "manipulation" of his character Zeno. In sum, through Zeno, Svevo is illustrating his own disillusionment in respect of what modern man has become. We can reasonably assert, however, that Michelstaedter and his work represent a viscerally felt reaction to a malaise endemic to Western Man and his civilisation. And in that sense, Michelstaedter represents a new *Weltanschauung* and is hence equally valid, to use a frequently mis-used term, as Svevo's Zeno.

The question thus arises, which of the two authors, Svevo or Michelstaedter, is closer to a tangible reality? Which offers us a vision closer to the "truth"? Is it the author who describes things as they are, as does Svevo, or the author, Michelstaedter, who sees the world as he thinks it should be? Is it not merely a debate between the realist and the idealist, between the old and the young, between experience and innocence?

Indeed, Michelstaedter's concept of perfection has different existential implications. In reference to "l'uomo della persuasione", he says, for example:

"... [N]on c'è pane per lui, non c'è acqua, non c'è letto, non c'è famiglia, non c'è patria, non c'è dio - egli è solo nel deserto, e deve crear tutto da sè..."¹⁰

[For him there is no bread, there is no water, there is no bed, there is no family, there is no fatherland, there is no god - he is alone in the desert, and has to create everything for himself...]

Michelstaedter is here stripping life to its irreducible nakedness, divesting it of all its "illusions", its network of dependencies which constitute life and this brings him into conflict with the Marxist ideals and ideology as well, inasmuch as he places the emphasis on the individual, unrealistic as that may seem to contemporary eyes, and not on a mass movement or mass-consciousness which arrogates unto itself the task of creating a new social order, Michelstaedter's view is highly élitist and individualistic, a fact which may betray his essentially bourgeois origins for it focuses on the undaunted individual who is endowed with, or has acquired, the ability to transcend normative strictures on life and the way life is generally deemed to be worthy and "meaningful". In addition, this passage, inasmuch as it is radical in the original sense of the word, namely in that it touches the "roots" of our being, can be said to reveal his Jewish origins because atavistically and since biblical times, self-preservation has automatically been taken as a matter of coherence of the group. Further expanding on this point this passage can be seen as an attempt to reduce the image of Western Man to the essential, before the intervention of Christianity which discriminated against and oppressed Jews. This passage does not imply the latter, it can, however, be seen as indicative in its radicalness of a psychosis of oppression, imbibed through the centuries.

Not only does the preceding passage from Michelstaedter embody his ideal of perfection, it also outlines, and contains *in germe* implications pertaining to existence which embody his view of perfection. The first thing one notes is the emphasis on the solitary individual here. As we have indicated Michelstaedter's is a philosophy, a view of life which he prescribes for the individual, and is thus by implication élitist. Hence, one sees the affinity between himself and D'Annunzio and Nietzsche. His thinking is also élitist in that the individual is presumed to triumph single-handedly over social, conventional and psychological reality. Cecchi summarises Michelstaedter's thinking thus:

"... [L]a polemica morale del Michelstaedter è sostanzialmente diretta contro ch'egli chiama la volontà di 'continuare', contro al meschino amore della vita, e contro alla catena delle dipendenze che sono condizionate dal bisogno. Nel suo sistema la 'rettorica' è lo strumento di queste molteplici servitù. Ed è naturale che la 'rettorica' sia per lui immedesimata e inseparabile dallo spirito della società borghese non meno da quello che anima le rivendicazioni proletarie."¹¹

[Michelstaedter's moral polemic is directed essentially against that which he calls the will to "continue", against the servile love of life, and against chain of dependencies which are determined by need. According to his system, 'rettorica' is the instrument of these multiple servitudes. And it is natural for him that 'rettorica' is identified with, and inseparable from the spirit of bourgeoisie society no less than from that which inspires proletarian vengeance.]

The point that Michelstaedter makes is essentially pertains to the way in which life is to be lived, namely life as experienced in the present by the individual, buttressed by an unattainable ideal. It becomes an idealised vision for what the present should be. Man has to create everything for himself, his god, his country, everything, in short, in which he places faith or belief. Here we see how akin to Nietzsche Michelstaedter is. The "uomo della persuasione" / "perfezione" are Michelstaedter's ideal amalgam of human existence. In fact, this aspect of his thought has inspired many an article, among the most essential being that of Moretti Costanzi,¹² who called Michelstaedter "un esistenzialista *ante litteram*". What is most important to note is the contrast between Svevo's less absolutist view of life as opposed to Michelstaedter's individualised and élitist view. That is to say, Svevo's view is centred on his disbelief in perfection and the way this notion is made manifest in his character Zeno, whose life of apparent disease and neurosis is in fact his strength, the "health" that allows him to survive. The conventional notion of "malattia" in Svevo has become real "salute" - disease having become the best man could strive for. In Michelstaedter the conventional notion of life has become real death and real death in turn becomes the key to real life. His views pertaining to existence evince an exhortative tone. Man must be more than he is and this is precisely the point which Svevo refutes.

Man, in Svevo's view, cannot be more than he is. The present is only the future *in germe*, the present bearing within it the seeds for the future. In short, the ideals we may strive for cannot be realised in the present, they remain an elusive and often dangerous goal and reflect Man's inability to, and fear of, living the present. Zeno is constantly delaying his "ultima sigaretta", his "last cigarette" precisely because he cannot do without it in the present. Zeno's ideal love, Ada, remains an ideal, but he accepts Augusta in the present, resignedly - she is not an ideal - because he married her virtually by accident and he is unfaithful to her, despite numerous attempts not to be.

These incidents in Zeno's life serve as a metaphor for Man's inability to deal with the demands of the present. Zeno is a prisoner of time, hence the frequent references to the time of day and to dates. Zeno needs to be aware of time, precisely to affirm to himself that time really does not matter so as to justify his procrastination. He postpones whatever he has set out to do until such time as things happen to him. Svevo treats time with his customary irony, or rather treats the significance we attach to it, with irony. In this way too, Svevo is pillorying the very notion of striving to do something, of striving for an ideal, i.e., for something to happen in the future.

For Michelstaedter, on the other hand, the present has to be the future as well. He wants the present to encompass an ideal and an ideal is by definition and by derivation a future projection. A vision, an ideal, arises precisely because it does not exist in the present, otherwise there would be no perceived need for it. Yet, Michelstaedter persists in his view that the future can be contained in the present as well and in this he differs significantly from Svevo. What is our concern, however, is that they both have a specific view of time and give expression to it even though they attach differing values to it. So when Michelstaedter says :

"In ogni punto nell'attualità della sua affermazione c'è la vicinanza delle cose più lontane." [Stress Michelstaedter's.]¹³

[At every juncture of the present of his affirmation *there is the proximity of that which is distant.*]

He prescribes a view that should enable the individual to transcend the limitations of time and space, a view in which the individual sees himself as being truly "universal" in that he is of the universe. It is at this point that Michelstaedter relinquishes all conventional and normative notions of time and life and seems to subscribe to a metaphysical view which he feels should be present, consciously, in our daily existence. He dispenses with the notion of present, past and future, and renders them meaningless in the conventional sense. Svevo's Zeno also renders the concept of time meaningless, albeit in a different way. The fact remains that they both divest time of any conventional, normative meaning. Where Svevo ridicules the significance we attach to time, Michelstaedter embodies the notion of time into his ideal of the "uomo della persuasione" inasmuch as the "uomo della persuasione" must free himself from conventional and normative notions and strictures of time. In the following passage Michelstaedter sees the future as merely being a notion that separates the present from death:

"Gli uomini vivono per non morire."¹⁴

[Men live so as not to die.]

He ascribes a positive attribute to being able to transcend the limitations of time, namely:

"A chi ha la sua vita nel presente, la morte nulla toglie."¹⁵

[Life takes nothing away from him who has his life in the present.]

Life (and by implication, time) as lived by most men is, according to Michelstaedter, a pernicious illusion, to which he offers an alternative:

"Egli deve resistere senza posa alla corrente della propria illusione; s'egli cede in un punto e si concede a ciò che a lui si concede, nuovamente si dissolve la sua vita, ed ei vive la propria morte - . . ."¹⁶

[He must resist ceaselessly the course of his own illusion; if he concedes at one juncture and concedes to that which concedes to him, his life dissolves once more and he lives his own death - . . .]

Life, in an enfeebled form or state as far as Michelstaedter is concerned, is tantamount to death. For Svevo, life is an enfeebled state and as such thus reflects its essential nature and ultimate possibilities. In other words, for Svevo, life is an enfeebled state and an enfeebled state is life.

It is at this juncture that one notes the connection between Darwinism and the notion of perfection as Svevo treats it. In this regard Svevo says:

"Se tutte le cose fossero perfette, sarebbero identiche. Buona ragione per non essere perfetti!"¹⁷

[If everything were perfect, everything would be identical. A good reason for not being perfect!]

Michelstaedter recognises and takes cognisance of imperfection using the "uomo della rettorica" by way of illustration and interestingly he uses terms that would be familiar to Svevo. He says:

"Così nella vita il debole s'adatta."¹⁸

[Thus in life the weak man adapts.]

Michelstaedter recognises imperfection and rejects it, Svevo accepts imperfection as an unavoidable *sine qua non*, and builds his novel, La coscienza di Zeno, on this premise. The question which again one must bear in mind, is: Which of the two writers is more "realistic" and which of the two is more "idealistic"?

Michelstaedter echoes with unexpected similarity, Svevo's interpretation of Darwin, when he observes:

"Ogni sostituzione delle macchine al lavoro manuale istupisce per quel tanto le mani dell'uomo: poiché dal pensiero rivolto a determinate necessità erano state educate a saper fare; e dal congegno, in cui quel pensiero s'è cristallizzato una volta per sempre, rese inutili, perdono ora l'intelligenza di quelle necessità."¹⁹

[Every substitution of manual labour by machines atrophies in the same measure the hands of man: Since thought has been directed to particular necessities the hands of man have been trained to know how to work; and from the device in which that thought has been crystallised once and for all, rendered useless, the hands lose the intelligence of those necessities.]

Yet he does something else with this interpretation. He uses it to buttress and justify his rejection of Modern Man, because it presents him with a reality that he cannot accept. The interpretation therefore becomes part of his argument in favour of the necessity of a "uomo della persuasione". Svevo, using the same Darwinian material, realises and accepts the immutability of human nature. Michelstaedter wants to change human nature. This comparison serves to illumine both writers' respective attitudes to existence *per se*.

In Chapter Two mention was made of the words "salute/malattia" and "vita/morte". These concepts are also relevant to this phase of our discussion. There is obviously a connection between the idea of health and evolution. Strength is often synonymous with health and survival, and is, after all, the privilege of the fittest. Michelstaedter, echoing Svevo, says:

"L'iniziativa è sempre del più forte."²⁰

[The initiative is always of the fittest.]

Furthermore Michelstaedter's most important work prior to the publication of La persuasione e la rettorica, was his Il dialogo della salute, "the dialogue of health". Here we have the coincidence that Michelstaedter and Svevo's principal and mutual preoccupations,

viz., the quality of life, were so enmeshed, and indeed at times consonant. In fact, when Michelstaedter employs terms such as "principio della debolezza" - "principle of weakness" - and of being "in balia degli eventi"²¹ - "at the mercy of events" - these terms could well be inherent parts of Zeno's world. Like Zeno, Michelstaedter's "l'uomo della retorica" is described in the following terms:

"... [O]gnuno prende come nuova scusa alla vita meschina, amore e tormento della sua piccola volontà.

S'adattano alle nuove forme, persino al rifiuto d'alcune forme di vita, pur di vivere e di sperare..."²²

[Each one takes the love and torment of their enfeebled wills as a new excuse for a wretched life.

They adapt themselves to new forms even to the point of refuting some forms of life so long as [they are able] to live and to hope . . .] [Brackets mine.]

Here he could have been describing Zeno himself, and virtually in Svevo's own words. Zeno does adapt himself in order to survive, albeit in a way totally devoid of heroism. Svevo, in pillorying Zeno, pillories modern man. Man does adapt himself to new forms almost to the point of rejecting some forms of life, just for the sake of living and for the sake of hoping. Zeno projects everything to some vague, future time, when he will attain success. He deals, in short, more successfully with the future than he does with the present. The present requires "azione", the future can be dealt with on a theoretical basis, with the figments of one's imagination and does not require "azione". Zeno is very much this sort of person, the kind which Michelstaedter rejects implicitly. Svevo says in La coscienza di Zeno:

"Io appartenevo all'ambiente di salute e di onestà in cui regnava Augusta a cui tornavo subito col corpo e l'anima non appena Carla mi lasciava libero."²³

[I belonged to the realm of health and honesty where Augusta reigned and to whom I returned immediately, body and soul, as soon as Carla left me free.]

We see here in clear and unmistakeable relief, Zeno's lack of moral courage his instability, and his hypocrisy. He associates Augusta with honesty and health, knowing full well that his adulterous relationship with Carla is what he really wants and that such a relationship is "unhealthy" in societal terms. He can return to Augusta at some time in the future. Therefore, he oscillates between states of health and sickness, adapting himself "col corpo e l'anima" to prevailing winds, whims and needs. Zeno is here merely being his unheroic, survival-orientated self. He incarnates and typifies the contemporary non-hero. He does not abide by his relationship to Augusta nor by the one to Carla. He does not align himself staunchly one way or the other with either sickness or health. A state of pusillanimous flux is all that of which he is capable. Yet the fact that Zeno goes back to Augusta, because she represents health, is an even more telling symptom of his illness. His hypocrisy and disloyalty are conscious. He is aware, moreover, that he is transgressing and is further aware that he has no intention of doing anything about it. He is governed by his needs and does not necessarily act in accordance with what he wants or what would be "better" for him. And least of all, is he concerned about acting in a resolutely honest manner.

In proceeding with our discussion on "health", we must remind ourselves that Svevo takes as his premise that life is synonymous with disease.²⁴ Yet Michelstaedter says virtually the same thing when he says

"la nascita è l'accidente mortale."²⁵

[Birth is a mortal accident/Birth is a fatal mishap.]

Michelstaedter's statement above could seem to be cynical in the extreme, but what he is merely acknowledging here is that man's state, his birth and his death are not the results of choice on his part; life simply happens and is concluded with death. The above statement can also be viewed as an expression on Michelstaedter's part of the way most individuals lead their lives, as a mortal accident, a fatal accident, something in which they have no

choice, in short, a destiny which they accept unthinkingly. This becomes their disease, their life is death, life becomes nothing more than a fatal accident because the will of the individual, of the "uomo della retorica" is no more than the will to survive, so as not to die. For Michelstaedter, the "uomo della persuasione" must exercise his will and overcome the limitations of life and live it with the awareness that every moment of one's life could be the last. It is the acceptance of this last notion which gives life value, otherwise it merely becomes an "accidente", something which happens to the individual, as opposed to the individual acting upon life.

By way of contrast in Svevo's *Zeno*, we have the protracted description of an illness conveyed through the "stream of consciousness" of Zeno himself. Upon reading La coscienza di Zeno one is confronted with the disturbing realisation that one is in fact reading a case history of modern man, a case history of a chronic, incurable disease, and worse yet, an endemic disease. That is what existence has become in Svevo's terms.

Having said this about Svevo, it is interesting to note that Michelstaedter would seem to concur with what Svevo says as far as the notion of health is concerned. However, Michelstaedter believes that health is not given to everyone, thus implying that there are few who enjoy it. We note that with Michelstaedter - "salute" has become synonymous with "persuasione". Again the élitist tone is very clear:

"La via della salute non è corsa da omnibus, non ha segni, indicazioni . . . Ma ognuno ha in sé il bisogno di trovarla e nel proprio dolore l'indice, ognuno deve nuovamente aprirsi da sé la via, e poi si ritroverà ad esser sulla stessa via luminosa che i pochi eletti hanno percorso."²⁶

[The road to health is not traversed by everyone, it has no signs, no indication . . . but everyone has in himself the need to find it [the road] and in his own grief [finds] the direction, everyone has to open the way for himself anew, and then he will find himself again on the same enlightened way that the select few have travelled.] [Brackets mine.]

Michelstaedter has also given a specific meaning to the word "salute". To him it signifies a superior state of being. In Svevo "salute" is a state that can never be reached inasmuch as it does not even exist. Both writers pour scorn on the conventional meaning of "salute", however, namely "health", insofar as it is taken to mean conformity to bourgeois norms and values. Svevo's Zeno does not conform, he is unhealthy and wallows in his neuroses, and survives. The ostensibly healthy characters such as Guido Speier succumb and are destroyed by the values to which they aspire, very much in the way that man is destroyed by what he has created, viz., his instruments and ideas. In Michelstaedter, "salute" also does not signify conformity but has its own particular significance in the context that he has created for it, namely, the state of "persuasione" - "conviction". Thus it is important to note that both Svevo and Zeno attach specific meanings respectively to "salute", and both writers reject the conventional significance attached to the word. Logically and textually then, Michelstaedter's term "rettorica" is synonymous with "malattia". Both Svevo and Michelstaedter were undoubtedly pondering and reacting to the prevalent malaise, of their times as reflected in the Positivist faith in science and technology, the pace of industrialisation and capitalist expansion, the arms race, and the resultant competition for supremacy among the nations of Europe, all of which culminated in the First World War. Whereas in Svevo the words "malattia" and "salute" have become virtually indistinguishable one from the other, in Michelstaedter the word "malattia" is, as we have just noted, synonymous with "rettorica" because Michelstaedter ultimately believes that "persuasione-salute" are indeed worthy goals. This is where Michelstaedter and Svevo differ fundamentally. Yet this very divergence serves to illumine central themes in La persuasione e la rettorica and in La coscienza di Zeno.

Again we note in Michelstaedter the particular centrality of his concern with "salute". "Salute" and "persuasione" are self-imposed rigours which the individual himself must assume. In Svevo, since true "salute" does not exist, this problem and hence its consequent

obligation do not arise. Svevo neither prescribes nor imposes. Rather, he is aware of the general, endemic malaise, and through Zeno, demonstrates how all attempts at "salute" are futile. Giorgio Brianese, in his study on Michelstaedter, views this problem in the following manner placing emphasis on the "logic of domination":

"Rettorica e persuasione si rivelano entrambi come figure "interne" alla logica del dominio (e dunque della violenza). Con questa differenza: Che la rettorica è quella volontà che non sa conseguire quello che vuole, la persuasione la messa in attimo del massimo del dominio concreto."²⁷

[Rhetoric and persuasion [conviction] both reveal themselves as figures which are internal in respect of the logic of domination (and therefore of violence). With this difference: rhetoric is that will that does not know how to follow what it wants, and persuasion being the actuation of the apex of concrete domination.] [Brackets mine.]

The "dominio" of which Brianese speaks, applies to Michelstaedter inasmuch as the latter is preoccupied with the self dominating the self, the individual exercising his will over himself. Michelstaedter's thinking is a self-imposed philosophy. In Svevo, the "proposta", or "intention" such as we have in Zeno's innumerable attempts to acquire health by giving up smoking, for example, are the very symptoms of the latter's disease. The futile promises he makes to himself are again presbyterian, Zeno being the presbyter. They are goals projected into the distant future, and ones that divest him of the responsibility of "azione" in the present.

It is at this stage that it becomes imperative to discuss the biographical fact of Michelstaedter's suicide and the question is whether his suicide is the recognition of the impossibility of attaining "persuasione". Is it not as Brianese points out, namely? :

"Tuttavia la persuasione è impossibile la rettorica vincente."²⁸

[In any event persuasion [conviction] is impossible and rhetoric victorious.] [Brackets mine.]

One notes the concurrence here of Svevo's and Michelstaedter's ideas. Both Svevo and Michelstaedter acknowledge the victory of "rettorica", to use Michelstaedter's word, and refute the possibility of attaining "persuasione" or health. Hence, it is appropriate at this point to pose the inevitable question as to whether Michelstaedter's suicide symbolically indicates an acknowledgement on his part of the veracity of Svevo's point of view. Michelstaedter's "persuasione" is unattainable, at best exceedingly impracticable, if Svevo's view that health is impossible, obtains. And is it not precisely the insupportable realisation of this, an apocalyptic "revelation", as it were, induced paradoxically by Michelstaedter's own relentless logic, which may have at least partially precipitated his tragic end?

It seems that from Michelstaedter's earlier work Il dialogo della salute, he presaged or foresaw Svevo's point by saying the following:

"Non [sono i] mali che colpiscono uomini sani, ma uomini tristi e mortali, che secondo la loro *natura* s'ammalano e muoiono." [Stress Michelstaedter's, brackets mine.]²⁹

[It is not misfortune that strikes healthy men but [strikes] sad and mortal men who become diseased and die in accordance with their *nature*.] [Brackets mine.]

Here Michelstaedter makes one of his few more broadly inclusive references to human nature inasmuch as he attributes man's demise and his apostacy from his nature, again a view not dissimilar from Svevo's. In other words, moral just as physical, decline in the human being occurs because of, and in accordance with, human nature. In other words, it does not occur necessarily because of external or tangential causes. Is he not acknowledging the inevitability of disease, the impossibility of health? However, for the most part, Michelstaedter tends to refute the idea of the imperfectibility of human nature and places emphasis on the idea of Man's capacity to overcome and to transcend his own nature. Generally, he puts credence in the apotheosis of the few, the élite, the select, though in the above passage we detect an allusion on his part, to a transient, fleeting doubt.

Subsequently, however, in La persuasione e la rettorica, despite his observation above, he persists in believing that man can indeed defy, transcend and master his own nature. In sum, man has the ability to re-fashion, re-make himself into a superior being inspite of his intrinsic nature. Michelstaedter's belief in the individual, his élitism, seem to hold sway, and more significantly, it is the Nietzschean concept of *Wille* or *volontà* which comes to the fore and departs from Svevo's more Darwinian mode of thought. However, there is, from time to time, equivocation, doubt and a hesitant reflection by Michelstaedter which tend to confute his more consistent stance:

"Ma ci son cose che distruggono la salute stessa e del corpo e dell'anima, contro le quali né forza fisica vale, né animo libero, cose che ti tolgono appunto questa libertà e questa forza e ti tengono debole e miserabile in lor balfa."³⁰

[But there are things which destroy health itself, the health of the body and of the soul against which neither physical force nor a free spirit are of any value, things that remove this very freedom and this strength and which keep you enfeebled and miserable and at their mercy.]

Here Michelstaedter is acknowledging the fact that there are factors external to the individual beyond his control, factors that destroy health, and by implied extension they destroy "persuasione" as well. Yet we note that the superhuman effort Michelstaedter attempts is to subdue, and attain dominion over the very things which could undermine health or "persuasione". But once more, and with striking irony, this is also the confirmation of a Svevean idea inasmuch as Svevo too acknowledges the presence of things that subvert and demolish health. One cannot stress too much that the important difference is that Svevo does not think it possible, nor does he prescribe any means with which to overcome those factors which undermine health and that operate beyond the sphere of the individual. On a psychological level, one could surmise that Michelstaedter did indeed recognise in himself the weaknesses and deficiencies in his thought as briefly described above. Thus, it can be stated with some plausibility that the concept of "persuasione" can, in this light, be viewed as being a reaction to "rettorica", that is, as a way of opposing, of

refuting and countering weakness, or "malattia" as he perceived them in himself and in those around him. But here we are in the realm of psychological speculation which is neither the purpose nor intent of the present study.

At this point it is also important to remind oneself that Michelstaedter and Svevo were not alone in the search for health, and could be counted among other contemporary writers who many of whom searched for health amidst the impasse in which Western Civilisation had found itself:

"Les fondateurs de cette culture sont tous nés ce n'est pas un hasard entre 1844 et 1880 [Svevo, 1861, Michelstaedter, 1887], Verlaine en 1844, Loti en 1850, Eckhoud, Rimbaud et Wilde 1854, Gide en 1869, Proust en 1871, Thomas Mann en 1878, Montherlant en 1876, Foster en 1879, Martin du Gard et Zweig en 1881 . . . [T]ous errant une 'lumière a la main' dans les catacombes de la civilisation industrielle, à la recherche d'un impossible salut." [Brackets mine]³¹

[It is not perchance that the founders of this culture were all born between 1844 and 1880 [Svevo, 1861, Michelstaedter, 1887], Verlaine in 1844, Loti in 1850, Eckhoud, Rimbaud and Wilde 1854, Gide in 1869, Proust in 1871, Thomas Mann in 1878, Montherlant in 1876, Foster in 1879, Martin du Gard and Zweig in 1881 . . . [A]ll wandered with a lamp in the hand in the catacombs of industrial civilisation searching for impossible salvation.] [Brackets mine.]

We have heretofore attempted to analyse how both the concept of perfection and the total refutation of that concept, have a direct and intimate bearing on questions concerning the condition of humankind, Man's existence and his nature. We have also striven to clarify the differences and concurrences in regard to these questions, in Michelstaedter and in Svevo. Moreover, it bears reiteration here that Svevo, through his protagonist, Zeno, reflects an acceptance of life as it is , not an idealized version of what it ought to be, and this in spite of the fact that Zeno himself, does not supposedly, "accept" life tacitly. The paradox is more seeming than actual, because Zeno "manipulates" life to suit his own ends. His absurd "struggles with life" are patently *pro forma* and not *de facto*, and transparently of no substance in a larger sense. They are, however, symptomatic of his disease. This in turn

renders the very concept of perfection in Zeno's case even more remote and ludicrous than would be a merely acquiescent and passive acceptance of life with all its imperfections. With Zeno, dissemblance and the pretense of serious engagement with life are perfectly natural, in fact axiomatic.

In Michelstaedter, because of his belief in the attainability of perfection, albeit ultimately, responses to the nature of Man, the human condition, and possibilities or impossibilities inherent therein are very different in that Michelstaedter imposes a code of conduct on the individual who wants to attain "persuasione" or "salute". We note how in La coscienza di Zeno, any attempt to impose a code of conduct on Zeno is doomed to failure. Zeno continually acts in his own shortsighted self-interest or manipulates reality to the extent that ultimately he saves his own skin. He is devoid of heroism. He is, as we have stated, the anti-hero. The "uomo della rettorica" in Michelstaedter is a hypothetical character sketched by Michelstaedter to illustrate the complacency, the smugness and materialism which he sees as being a *sine qua non* of the bourgeoisie. The "uomo della rettorica" symbolises all that Michelstaedter despised in those around him, in the society and its mores and he derides the facility with which the "uomo della rettorica" arrogates to himself his powerful position in society, while he, the "uomo della rettorica", lives in a house built on sand, built on facile concepts of life, love, knowledge and meaning because he is intrinsically too weak to confront the grievous truths of life which undermine everything that he believes in. In short, the "uomo della rettorica" lacks the courage, the will and the strength to face life and to truly transcend its limitations, these qualities being the mark of the "uomo della persuasione".

One cannot ignore the fact that Michelstaedter ended his life by suicide. This event lends itself to a variety of speculations and should not be viewed in an exclusively psychological manner. One needs to illumine the symbolic significance of his suicide. Indeed a serious

study of Michelstaedter's La persuasione e la rettorica leads one to the tenuous, though perfectly plausible conclusion that that work functioned as a philosophical justification for his suicide. It should be kept in mind that Michelstaedter's view of "persuasione" is highly personalised, and one can justifiably speculate, though not assume definitively that upon completion of his *opus principalis*, having realised the impracticability of his ideal, he put an end to his life. But this does not mean that Michelstaedter denies life itself. He extinguished his own life either because he realised, like Svevo, that "salute" or "persuasione" is impossible, or he may have concluded that the act of death is the very affirmation of life. That is to say, he may have felt that he had indeed attained "persuasione" at least in his own terms, that he had in fact achieved his own salubrious state of higher consciousness and consequently, life thereafter would have had utterly no meaning for him whatsoever. This is plausible despite the fact that he committed suicide if not also because of the fact that he committed suicide. Life takes on a new significance when death is approached with the frankness and fearlessness with which Michelstaedter confronted it, having seen life as he did, as a qualitative experience and not a quantitative experience. In this regard Michelstaedter is very akin to the existential thinkers who appeared later in this century.

By extension then, Svevo's desire to see the world free of parasites as he does in his famous last chapter of La coscienza di Zeno, is also, ultimately, even if paradoxically, a statement of hope, a reaffirmation of life as it ought to be, although it amounts to a denial of life in its debased form, a form that Man himself has shaped. In this regard, Michelstaedter and Svevo are remarkably similar in that both implicitly reject life as lived by most men. And each views "civilisation" and its institutions as bringing about the ultimate destruction of life itself. It is not life they reject. Rather, it is the form and substance that life has acquired, the guise it has assumed that they reject. Each writer uses different means to arrive at the same end. Both Michelstaedter and Svevo share a distinct and unconventional

understanding of the concept "salute", yet both agree on the concept of "malattia". Their premises are remarkably similar, as are their conclusions, but their respective "cammin" are very different.

Let us now turn our attention to the concepts of "libertà" and "autenticità" as intrinsic elements in the debate of perfection and "una vita degna di essere vissuta" and their opposites.

¹Saint-Exupery, Antoine, Night Flight, Tr. Curtis Cate, Penguin Bks., (Penguin Modern Classics), Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 144.

²Michelstaedter, Carlo, La persuasione e la retorica, Adelphi, Milano, 1982, p. 70.

³Svevo, Italo, Opera Omnia, Dall'Oglio, Milano, 1966, p. 638.

⁴Ibid., p. 642.

⁵D'Annunzio, Gabriele, La vergine delle roccie, Mondadori, (Gli Oscar), Milano, 1983, p. 40.

⁶Vide Guglielmino, Salvatore, Guida al Novecento, Principato Editore, Milano, 1988, Sez.I, p. 198 ff.

⁷Nietzsche, Friedrich, Also sprach Zarathustra, Goldmann, Verlag, Manchen, 1989, p. 97.

⁸Nietzsche, Friedrich, Thus spake Zarathustra, Tr. R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin Bks., (Penguin Classics), Harmondsworth, 1961, p. 141.

⁹Cecchi, Emilio, Letteratura del Novecento, vol. II, Mondadori, Milano, 1968, p. 763.

¹⁰Michelstaedter, C., op.cit., p. 70.

¹¹Cecchi, E., op.cit., p. 765.

¹²Moretti-Costanzi, Teodorico, "Significato di una metafisica" ristampato poi con il titolo: "Il personalismo di Michelstaedter" in appendice a Meditazioni inaturali sull'Essere e il senso della vita, Editoriale Arte e Storia, Roma, 1953, pp. 135-139.

¹³Michelstaedter, C., op.cit., p. 87.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 69.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 70.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁷Svevo, I., op.cit., p. 645.

¹⁸Michelstaedter, C., op.cit., p. 65.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 158.

²⁰Ibid., p. 178.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 179.

²³Svevo, Italo, La coscienza di Zeno, Dall'Oglio, Milano, 1968, p. 278.

²⁴Ibid., p. 479.

²⁵Michelstaedter, C., op.cit., p. 128.

²⁶Michelstaedter, C., Opere, a cura di Gaetano Chiavacci, Sansoni, Firenze, 1958, p. 700.

²⁷Brianese, Giorgio, "Essere, nulla e volontà di dominio nel pensiero di Carlo Michelstaedter." Gorizia, 1984, in Studi goriziani, 1982, vols. 55-56. Istituto per gli Incontri Mitteleuropei, p. 33-34.

²⁸Brianese, G., op.cit., p. 34.

²⁹Michelstaedter, C., op.cit., p. 325.

³⁰Ibid., p. 323.

³¹La Riviere, Michel, Les amours masculines, Intro. Dominique Fernandez, Lieu Commun, Paris, 1984, p. 18.

CHAPTER FOUR

"The only thought to liberate the mind is that which leaves it alone, certain of its limits and of its impending end."¹

Central to the discussion of "una vita degna di essere vissuta", is the concept of "libertà". There is, however, one further question to be answered before we consider this. And that question is whether Svevo and Michelstaedter are to be considered either "pessimistic" or "optimistic". We raise this question now, for as we hope to clarify in this chapter, that question will assume greater pertinence as our discussion of "libertà" proceeds. Significantly both writers address this fundamental question in as many words.

In essay number 118 of Michelstaedter's Scritti vari² he discusses pessimism and optimism. Significantly, Svevo wrote an article entitled "Ottimismo e pessimismo"³. Svevo has a simple definition basically amounting to the fact that finality and an order to the universe are views which can be considered optimistic. He seems to derive comfort from the fact that nature has a way of regulating life, in that only those fit to survive actually do survive; in short, there is order in apparent chaos, in Nature's apparent indifference to life. Nature operates according to natural selection, and, although what Svevo says in the above-mentioned essay is derived from Darwin, it does give us insight into his basic premises.

Whosoever does not see an order in the universe or finds no order and/or chaos is pessimistic. However, what is most revealing in Svevo's article, is that he intuitively that an excessive love of life leads to desperate excesses. He says that the aged do not kill each other so often because indifference permeates one's attitude to life as one becomes older.

The pessimist does not kill himself at all, at least not in theory, because such a person would believe that life is followed by nothing, and so waits for this undeniable "nothing" to

arrive. Alternatively, such a person might believe that life may be eternal and hence life as such might not disappear in any way. And for this reason, he considers suicide a palliative.

The optimist, according to Svevo, may commit suicide but he most likely does not grieve about doing so. Svevo says that being pessimistic is an intellectual exercise, and that optimism has more to do with temperament. From one's temperament, one arrives at a theory which reflects that temperament. Optimists, according to Svevo, live for the future and also live for the here and now. Interestingly, like Michelstaedter, Svevo acknowledges that man does not know how to live for the here and now, for the present, but only with his sights set on the future, and in so doing, the present becomes bearable. It would seem that Svevo, does allow for, or recognises with qualifications, an attitude similar to Michelstaedter's attitude inasmuch as he, Svevo, foresees that an excessive love of life, (which Michelstaedter claims to have,) leads to excesses generated and motivated by desperation. Michelstaedter would maintain that an excessive love of life enables the individual to glean the most from life, under the conditions that he sets out for his "uomo della persuasione". It then depends on the reader whether he views "persuasione" and the subsequent suicide of Michelstaedter as a desperate excess or as an affirmation of life. Does one adopt Svevo's view of life, namely of accepting life "fully"? to use Camus' expression*. Or does one accept the challenge that Michelstaedter offers? That is, one in which the meaning and scope of the word "life" is extended to the point where such meaning and scope become consonant with, and indistinguishable from, death. In examining this matter, one must bear in mind that in Michelstaedter's terms, life as lived according to the dictates of "rettorica", is tantamount to death. Again in terms of

*Camus states: "Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully. Now, no one will live this fate, knowing it to be absurd, unless he does everything to keep before him that absurd brought to light by consciousness . . . [T]o abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. The theme of permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience. Living is keeping the absurd alive."⁴

"persuasione", death for Michelstaedter becomes life because death in the conventional sense of the word poses no threat to a life lived according to the dictates of "persuasione". It is also significant to our discussion to note that it is Svevo, the older man, who implicitly "understands" Michelstaedter, the younger man. Michelstaedter says that the "uomo della persuasione" need fear nothing in death⁵ and significantly Svevo himself says:

"Verrà il tempo in cui l'uomo non temerà più di morire."⁶

[The time will come when man will no longer fear dying [fear to die].]

Svevo is here confronting the same issues, the same quests which preoccupy Michelstaedter, and in particular, man's fear of mortality. Immediately following this sentence, in the very next line he says, in his usual ironic way: "una bellissima speranza!" Moreover, Svevo goes on to say that this hope of overcoming the fear of mortality is not unrealisable and that it is in fact a great and feasible hope. Thus it appears that Svevo, at least in this passage above, does not consider the fear of death a *sine qua non* of life. And as far as this specific aspect of Michelstaedter's thinking is concerned, it would seem that Svevo is in agreement. We must then ask: In Svevo's terms, would Michelstaedter be a pessimist or an optimist? The answer probably would be: either because, on the one hand, Svevo maintains that a pessimist is someone who hangs on to life because such a person wants to see whether nothingness would in fact follow death or whether life is in fact eternal. In the latter instance suicide becomes the actuation of life. Suicide, therefore, by extension, reflects a vital optimism because it indicates the point at which a human being has reached full control of his life to the point where he can end it with impunity. In sum, then, Svevo believes that the strength to command one's own destiny in terms of choosing to end one's own life, can thus be considered a reflection and logical consequence of optimism.

Michelstaedter likewise does not lend himself to being categorised as a pessimist or an optimist. He says, for example:

"Quando si parla in genere di pessimismo, non si parla altro che d'un punto alto dell'ottimismo vitale."⁷

[When one speaks in general about pessimism, one is not speaking of anything other than a high point of vital optimism.]

Michelstaedter's suicide can also be seen as the apex of pessimism or the apex of optimism. Just as both Svevo and Michelstaedter reveal significant points of concurrence when dealing respectively with terms such as "salute" and "malattia", so here too it is obvious that their respective views of pessimism and optimism find areas of consonance or accord. Each writer tends to "split hairs" both in defining (in multiple ways) these words "health", "disease", "optimism" and "pessimism". Their views reflect a remarkably similar preoccupation concerning issues which they have both indicated as areas of speculation. It is ultimately a question of nuance and emphasis which sheds light on their respective differences and the extent to which theory and speculation has remained such, as is the case with Svevo, and the extent to which Michelstaedter, by contrast, attempts to put theory or speculation into practice.

Svevo's Zeno would seem to be an optimist in that he survives and does more or less what he wants to do, even by default, despite having the conventional attributes of a pessimist and being described in terms which render the debate on optimism and pessimism paradoxically quite futile. Svevo's Zeno is a creation that embodies the phenomenon of life, life which simply is. Zeno is the victim of society, history and the ethos of times past and present, all of which are undeniable forces that act on the individual. Ultimately Svevo's debate centres on the way in which the individual reacts to these forces, (if he is aware of them at all) and on the question of what is left of the individual who is at once the

product of these forces. The question of "what is an individual?" is almost reduced to being purely academic. Michelstaedter also renders futile the debate on pessimism and optimism. Both Svevo and Michelstaedter have systems of thought which transcend and minimise convenient and conventional categories such as optimism and pessimism. Having observed this, one can return to the discussion of "una vita degna di essere vissuta".

It has been mentioned in Chapter One that Svevo as a novelist created a protagonist, Zeno, through whom he, the author, could "operate" so to speak. Thus, Zeno is a protagonist who "serves" Svevo as a vehicle for his creator's views. But the word vehicle must be stressed and not "mouthpiece" because Zeno's words, thoughts, actions and non-actions convey the character's own disease and the diseases of modern man which are filled with contradictions. Svevo himself, being the creator of Zeno, is perfectly consistent, albeit paradoxically, in making Zeno appear consistently inconsistent. It would seem that the exhortative tone or style adopted by Michelstaedter, is due in large measure to the absence of a protagonist apart from himself. In other words, Michelstaedter refrains from "employing" artistically, as it were, a protagonist, i.e., a "filter" for the expression of his own thoughts. Thus the only means effectively left to Michelstaedter is that of adopting an approach that is itself formed by the ideal to which he strives in his work and, significantly, in his life. Had Michelstaedter written a novel, he would have had to explore and fabricate a web of complexities and contradictions which would have detracted from the "purity" of his ideal. His La persuasione e la rettorica can be viewed as a manifesto of "una vita degna di essere vissuta", "a life worthy of being lived". One could call Michelstaedter's manifesto "existential" in that what he sets out to do in La persuasione e la rettorica is nothing other than an exhortation, a guide, a set of values on how to live; it derives significance from the fact that it provides a set of ideas, practicable or not as they may be, that pertain to existence. In this light it is also significant that Michelstaedter also was a poet, poetry providing him with a concise format with which to convey an intensely held view of life. His

poetry appears to be La persuasione e la rettorica in poetic form. This will become more evident at a later stage in this chapter.

The following passage clearly illustrates his notion of a worthy life:

"No, egli, [cioè l'uomo della persuasione] deve permanere, non andar dietro a quelli, fingendosi fermi perché essi lo attraggono sempre nel futuro; egli deve permanere seppur vuole ch'essi gli siano nel presente . . . [E]gli ha il coraggio di strappar da sé la trama delle dolci e care cose che conforta a esser ancora giuocati nel futuro, e chiede il possesso attuale . . ."⁸

[No, he, [in other words the man of "conviction"] has to endure, must not follow those who pretend to be stable because they will always draw him into the future; he must endure even though he wants them to be in the present for him . . . [H]e has the courage to remove by himself the conspiracy of that which is sweet and dear and which is comforting in that it is enacted in the future, and requires actual possession [possession in the here and now] . . .]

It must be noted once more, that Michelstaedter places the emphasis on the here and now, as if he wished to combine both the future and the present, in the present. He considers the concept of the future as being a mere projection born out of fear of death and of the inability to face life as it is now. However, this is indeed similar to Svevo's view - wherein Zeno is forever making references to time and "buone proposte per il futuro". But Michelstaedter differs from Svevo in that the former imbues the present with a content, a heroism of which Svevo's Zeno is the absolute antithesis in terms of "persuasione/salute".

For example, Michelstaedter observes:

"A chi ha la sua vita nel presente, la morte nulla toglie; poiché niente in lui chiede più di continuare; niente è in lui per la paura della morte."⁹

[To him who has his life in the present, death cannot remove anything; since nothing in him requires to be perpetuated; there is nothing in him [that is there] because of fear of death.]

Here he explains his view that the "uomo della persuasione" need never fear death because his life is in the present. He does not live with a concept of the future, and it follows therefrom that he does not live with a fear of death. Zeno is forever trying to be healthy, to stop smoking which damages his health, precisely in order to stave off death. He fails in his attempts at social acceptability in a society which customarily requires a display of all the trappings of health. This social acceptability and the bourgeois society that determines and defines the norms of acceptability are in fact more diseased than Zeno himself. Social acceptability, at least in a conventional bourgeois sense, requires something less than honesty on the part of the individual. In other words, the latter must adapt in society or in a social context to being someone other than, or less than he actually is, precisely in order to be accepted by society. Society is exposed by Svevo as an intricate myriad of lies and deceptions, and it is here that he and Michelstaedter concur yet again. Svevo, through Zeno, and other characters in La coscienza di Zeno, presents those lies, deceptions, pretenses and falsities and prescribed modes of behaviour as the very web, the indispensable substance and "sustenance" of bourgeois society. But Michelstaedter, in his "uomo della persuasione" rejects those same lies, deceptions and pretensions forthwith and in a categorical and undisguised manner, albeit a less subtle manner than Svevo. The practitioner, the protector and upholder of bourgeois social conventions and thought patterns is Michelstaedter's "uomo della retorica".

It is germane to the present discussion to note here that in Svevo's first novel Una vita, the protagonist, Alfonso Nitti, commits suicide. It is the suicide of someone who cannot cope. It is the "pessimistic" suicide. And for this reason Una vita has been interpreted by various Marxist critics¹⁰ as being a novel which lends itself most favourably to a Marxist interpretation because Nitti's suicide is due to "bourgeoise oppression" and being overwhelmed by the inhumanity of bourgeois society. From Alfonso Nitti, Svevo progresses to Zeno Cosini who, as the surname suggests, is just a particle of a greater

human experience. In La coscienza di Zeno, Zeno Cosini becomes the focus, the synthesis of the human experience. Michelstaedter, as the individual, Carlo Michelstaedter, would seem in some measure to correspond more closely to Svevo's creation, Alfonso Nitti, although the latter is devoid of Michelstaedter's idealism.

Zeno, on the other hand, is a typical representative or expositor of modern European society, and as such, is conspicuously symbolic of the human condition because he bears traits which are common to countless human beings, traits which are endemic and anything but unique. He incarnates and encapsulates a decrepit moral and psychological detritus on a kaleidoscopic scale spanning centuries of man's existence. With this in mind, then, we note that Svevo makes a telling, incisive observation which again is remarkably similar to the kind of statement that one would expect from Michelstaedter:

"Già l'uomo non sa vivere per l'ora presente ma è vero che con gli occhi sempre rivolti al futuro, l'ora presente si riempie sempre con sorrisi."¹¹

[As it is man does not know how to live in the here and now but it is true that with eyes always directed towards the future the present is always filled with smiles.]

Here Svevo is defining what in Michelstaedter's terms would be called "l'uomo della rettorica". Svevo perceives the same weaknesses in man as does Michelstaedter, if one assumes, that is, that the inability to live the present and not live for the future, is to be viewed as a weakness. According to Michelstaedter, the "uomo della persuasione" must not enfeeble himself by yearning for mechanisms which provide support. But here again, Svevo's Zeno comes to mind, for he is forever yearning, manipulating and engineering "support mechanisms" - (less euphemistically designated as "crutches") - to carry him through life. And once again Zeno is effectively in harmony with Michelstaedter's "uomo de la rettorica", as the following passage in Michelstaedter permits us to conclude:

"Ma qui troviamo questi individui ridotti a [ad essere] meccanismi, previsione attuata nell'organismo, non però, come ci aspetteremmo, [cioè] vittime della loro debolezza - in balia del caso, ma 'sufficienti' [auto affermatorii] e sicuri [di sé] come divinità. - La loro degenerazione è detta educazione civile, la loro fame è attività di progresso, la loro paura è la morale, la loro violenza, il loro odio egoistico - [S]i son fatti una forza della loro debolezza, poiché su questa comune debolezza speculando hanno creato una sicurezza fatta di reciproca convenzione".¹²

[But here we find these individuals reduced [to being] mechanisms, a premonition actuated in the organism, not, however, as we expected it, [namely] victims of their weakness - at the mercy of chance, but 'sufficient' [self-affirmatory] and sure [of themselves] like divinities. Their degeneration is called good breeding, their hunger is the activity of progress, their fear is morality, their violence, their egotistical hatred ... [T]hey have made a strength out of their weakness, since by speculating upon this shared weakness they have created a security made from reciprocal [shared] convention.]

This description of the "uomo della retorica" is in conspicuous harmony with the image Svevo has created of Zeno and the society of which he is a victim. Zeno does make a strength out of weakness and is very much at the mercy of chance. He does not moralise, but if morality is merely fear masquerading as an absolute and universal truth then Zeno does constantly find himself at odds with morality. Guido Speier is self-congratulatory and Zeno is the product of an accumulative degeneration. The following passage adequately illustrates what "persuasione" is and contrasts fundamentally with the description of "rettorica" above:

". . . [E]gli deve prendere su di sé la responsabilità della sua vita, come l'abbia a vivere giungere alla vita, che su altri non può ricadere; deve aver egli stesso in sé la sicurezza della sua vita, che altri non gli può dare . . . non debba rinunciare al possesso presente della sua vita."¹³

[. . . [H]e has to take upon himself the responsibility of his life, as he has to live it joined to life, so that it does not fall upon others; he himself has to have the certainty of his life, that others cannot give him . . . he must not renounce the present possession of his life.]

As we see Michelstaedter too, like Svevo, speaks of the "possesso presente" which Svevo calles "vivere l'ora presente".

Michelstaedter and Svevo again confront respectively the same basic issues. In this

instance, the central question is how to live life. In regard to this question, Michelstaedter proffers an interpretation of life that imposes a rigorous code of conduct on the individual in order that the individual attain "persuasione/salute". Svevo likewise acknowledges the need for "salute", but he does not impose a rigorous code of conduct on Zeno. Rather he shows how Zeno is incapable of attaining "salute" and indeed, Zeno's striving for "salute" is itself a further manifestation of his illness.

Thus, we must ask whether Michelstaedter's striving for "salute/persuasione" is not, paradoxically, an indication of his, Michelstaedter's, own personal malady, when one bears in mind the virtual unattainability of his goal and the conspicuous intellectual vulnerability, i.e., the precariousness of his philosophic stance. Or, is Michelstaedter's an idealism which is worthy of emulation? These are crucial questions pertaining to human existence, which both writers pose and answer in their respective ways.

Marco Cerruti approaches this 'problematica' as follows:

"Michelstaedter definisce una visione del mondo ben precisa e giunge a un'idea di persuasione intesa come atto trascendente."¹⁴

[Michelstaedter defines a very precise vision of the world and arrives at a concept of conviction ["persuasione"] understood as a transcendent act.]

Michelstaedter's existentialism has been described as verging on metaphysical by Maria Raschini¹⁵ and Moretti-Costanzi¹⁶ and Giulio Cattaneo¹⁷ agree with this interpretation as well. Yet Sergio Campailla in his study on Michelstaedter¹⁸ points out that Maria Raschini's interpretation of Michelstaedter is strongly influenced by a Kierkegaardian view of life.

However it is not the intent nor is it within the purview of this essay to of this essay to

corroborate Michelstaedter's existentialism nor to discuss the various nuances of that existentialism. Whether his existentialism is "religious" or "metaphysical" or neither is important only insofar as it may serve to illumine the life that Svevo's Zeno leads and sheds light upon the implications pertaining to the worth arising from an examination of that life. Zeno is an "inetto" precisely because he lives in the midst of the crisis of Western Civilisation and is a product of the confused cultural and social dismemberment that characterises the era in which he, Zeno, lives. Hence Svevo's character is a shadow of what man might have been. In other words, if society and civilisation have become impoverished and diseased, culturally and spiritually speaking, then the individual who is the product of, and the end-result of centuries of that gradual decay, will himself suffer that disease. If the individual is part of a larger organism, namely, society, which society is diseased, then the individual too becomes inevitably diseased.

In Svevo, there is an awareness of a time when society might perhaps have been less diseased and less fraudulent, less removed from an awareness of its own origins and in such a society, the individual might have been "healthier", might have known "salute". Zeno is merely the product of accumulated disease acquired through centuries of Western man's civilisation. As Western man has become more sophisticated, technologically and intellectually he has become proportionately more removed from his origins and real functions.

Svevo does not necessarily adopt an attitude that one could call nostalgic, he simply illustrates this decay through his character Zeno, buttressing his views with Darwinian concepts which form the intellectual basis together with Schopenhauer, for his *Weltanschauung*. The psychoanalysis used as a literary tool in Svevo, merely serves as a sophisticated device to illustrate the absurd extent to which man has become alienated. The process of alienation and dismemberment is irreversible and Zeno's confused

meandering through life, without specific direction other than survival, is the antithesis of the "uomo della persuasione". This is so because the latter attempts to lead a life of spiritual integrity (as opposed to dismemberment) by imposing a rigorous upon himself, rigorous norms of conduct formulated and regulated by considerations of spiritual rectitude.

Michelstaedter's notion of existence is an implicit facet of his idea of "persuasione", which is a recipe for life, for human existence, and is arrived at by a process of constant negation of all that is false. And this process is a pre-condition, an indispensable evolution, as it were, which in itself become identified with "autenticità". And it is "autenticità" which in turn creates a state of "libertà".

In this light, then, Michelstaedter's death by suicide assumes a notably different significance. For life viewed from this perspective leads to a seemingly self-contradictory and paradoxical conclusion, though in fact, it is a sequential, perfectly rational and indeed logical conclusion, viz., that Michelstaedter's suicide was an affirmation of life, a life worthy of having been lived and hence his suicide was not an act of defeat (unlike Alfonso Nitti's suicide). Rather, it was an act of rebellion, not of remorse and despair. The following poem by Michelstaedter very succinctly illustrates his point of view regarding life and death:

Il canto delle crisalidi

Vita, morte,
la vita nella morte;
morte, vita,
la morte nella vita.

Noi col filo
col filo della vita
nostra sorte
filammo a questa morte.

E più forte
è il sogno della vita -
se la morte
a vivere ci aiuta

ma la vita
la vita non è vita
se la morte
la morte è nella vita

e la morte
morte non è finita
se più forte
per lei vive la vita.

Ma se vita
sarà la nostra morte
nella vita
viviam solo la morte

morte, vita,
la morte nella vita;
vita, morte,
la vita nella morte. ¹⁹

[Song of the chrysalides]

[Life, death,
life in death;
death, life,
death in life.

We with the thread
with the thread of life
spun our fate
unto this death.

And stronger
is the dream of life -
if death
helps us to live

but life
life is not life
if death
death is in life

and death
death is not finite
if more strongly for death
life is lived.

But if life
will be our death
in life
we live only death

death, life,
death in life;
life, death,
life in death.]

Here, then, in poetic form, Michelstaedter expresses what is the essence of La persuasione e la rettorica, namely, the central theme and question of "una vita degna di essere vissuta". We note that he says "ma la vita/la vita non è vita/se la morte/la morte è nella vita". With these words, he is referring, of course, to life lived merely as an "inanimate" device, so to speak, to hedge off death, a state of inanition masquerading as "life". In the first stanza he says "vita, morte/ la vita nella morte;/morte, vita,/la morte nella vita." This is his quest, namely, to reveal in the text of the poem of which he is the protagonist, that the moment of death is in fact the apex, the apogee of life. In ending his own life, he is not rejecting life itself. On the contrary, he is ratifying it. Life for Michelstaedter is, we have seen, a predominantly qualitative and not a quantitative experience. Once a state of "persuasione/salute" has been reached, the danger of slipping into "rettorica" would be tantamount to "la morte nella vita", a metaphor for life lived aimlessly and pusillanimously, and thus the equivalent of death. For Michelstaedter such a life has no moral integrity, it is not "una vita degna di essere vissuta". This is why he says:

"Chi vuole fortemente la sua vita, non s'accontenta, temendo di soffrire ... ma anzi la persona di questo dolore rende . . . s'afferma là dove gli altri sono annientati dal mistero; quello per gli altri è mistero poiché trascende la loro potenza, per lui non è mistero, ch   l'ha voluto ed in ci   s'   affermato, cos   egli deve *crear s   stesso* per avere il valore individuale, che non si muove a differenza delle cose che vanno e vengono, ma    in s   *persuaso*." [Stresses Michelstaedter's.]²⁰

[He who wants his life passionately, is not contented, being afraid of suffering ... but, on the contrary a person [filled with] this grief gives . . . he affirms himself there where others are annihilated by mystery; for the others that is mystery since it transcends their power, for him it is not a mystery since he willed it and affirmed himself in it, thus he has to *create himself* in order to have individual worth, that is not moved by happenstance by things that come and go, rather, he is *convinced* in himself.]

Here we see that Michelstaedter asserts that the individual must create everything for himself; he often uses the word "strappare" to indicate a process of stripping away all that is false, by which process the individual acquires authenticity and ultimately attains liberty - liberty from the fear of death, freedom from life's deceptions.

Zeno, by contrast, is constantly the victim of his own illusions, and yet he is less deluded than those in society, such as Guido Speier and the Malfenti family who incarnate and symbolise the ultimate in bourgeois aspirations. They, Guido and the Malfenti family become metaphors for "normality", the kind of unquestioning "normality" that threw Europe headlong into the First World War, despite, or because of, the apparent "health"/"salute" that they imagine they possess. Svevo's obvious implication is that Zeno, patently ill though he is, is in fact only a fraction as ill and as morbid as the society of which he forms a part. Thus it is apparent that Svevo's critique of society, in spite of, if not because of, the subtlety of his ironies, becomes all the more damning and searing. Zeno, although he tends to conform to Michelstaedter's "uomo della retorica" is in fact leading an authentic life. It is authentic for him. He lives life as he is, deluded and a victim of himself as well as of society. However, what distinguishes Zeno from the other characters in La coscienza di Zeno is that he is conscious of his own malady and this gives him an authenticity in that he is aware of the disease inherent in him, whereas the other characters are not. They are so diseased that they are not even aware of it and claim to embody health and therefore do not seek a cure. Zeno is constantly seeking a cure, because he is obsessed by his disease. His disease, and the search for a cure he hopes he will never find, give substance and meaning to his life.

The liberty which Svevo envisages is a liberty attainable only once society and mankind have been destroyed - when man can, as it were, start afresh. Certainly, Zeno attains a liberty of sorts in that he is liberated paradoxically from the compulsion to be "healthy"; he may seek a cure, but the search for a cure is his life and the closest he is likely to be to health. He resigns himself to his disease and no longer aspires, nor compares himself to, the "successes" of the other "healthy" characters in the novel. But on a universal level, what does Zeno's life "mean" or imply? Svevo implies, using his novel La coscienza di Zeno as a

vehicle for his view that there cannot be true liberty in a society that is imprisoned by structures based upon illusions and greed, structures that will inevitably lead to the universal suicide of mankind. If Michelstaedter seeks ultimate liberty in his own suicide, then Svevo seeks ultimate liberty in the suicide of mankind. What is true for Michelstaedter on a personal, individual level, is true for Svevo on a universal level, and is not limited to the individual but includes the whole of mankind.

One can understand certain critics viewing Michelstaedter's convictions pertaining to existence as being religious or transcendental, or indeed, metaphysical when he states:

"Egli [i.e. l'uomo della persuasione] deve aver il *coraggio di sentirsi ancora solo*, di guardar in faccia il proprio dolore, di sopportarne *tutto il peso*." [Stresses are Michelstaedter's:]²¹

[He [i.e. the man of conviction] must have the *courage to continue to feel alone* to face his own grief, to bear its *entire weight*.]

Here Michelstaedter sees himself as almost Christlike. He is not seeking help from "other quarters", as it were. He is not professing a belief that will, in turn, give him salvation. No, he is making of himself a god-like creature.* It is in passages such as the foregoing that his "superomismo" becomes most apparent and a certain "messianic" passion becomes observable. His formula for life clearly requires the individual to have inherently superhuman qualities and an indomitable will at his command:

"Così l'uomo nella via della persuasione mantiene in ogni punto l'equilibrio della sua persona; egli non si dibatte, non ha incertezze, stanchezze, se non tiene mai il dolore ma ne ha preso onestamente la persona. *Egli lo vive in ogni punto*." [Stresses Michelstaedter's.]²³

[Thus man on the road of conviction maintains an equilibrium in every facet [in every moment] of his persona; he does not debate with himself, he has no uncertainties, periods of fatigue, unless he retains his grief but [at least] has embraced his persona honestly. *He lives it in every facet [in every moment]*.]

*In this regard it is interesting to note what Camus has to say: if God does not exist, Kirilov is god. If God does not exist, Kirilov must kill himself. Kirilov must therefore kill himself to become god.²²

Hence one must confront grief and pain in life, but not simply on an individual level. One must realise that pain is a *sine qua non* of life itself. In this regard, Michelstaedter's view of life becomes very Christ-like in that he feels that the individual must take upon himself, the pain and suffering that surround him: he must be aware of this ceaseless pain and suffering and make them part of his own reality so that "a ognuno il suo mondo è 'il mondo'"²⁴ - to use Michelstaedter's own term. In other words, the individual's world is the world, and, in turn, the world, and all that that implies, must become part of the individual's own world.

The individual, in Michelstaedter's terms must be in complete harmony with life, must not shun life but rather confront it fully. Only then can one experience liberty and joy. In fact Michelstaedter says "il dolore è gioia"²⁵ - "pain is joy", "grief is joy". What Michelstaedter means is that by being genuinely conversant with the suffering, pain, and grief of life, the individual may overcome them, inasmuch as he has made them part of himself and proven himself stronger than they are. This is manifestly an exceedingly rare capacity or "quality" which Michelstaedter demands. Nonetheless, it is laudable and humane, albeit virtually impossible.

In Svevo's La coscienza di Zeno there is none of this. What there is, however, is a compassion for life as it is with all its imperfections. But neither Michelstaedter nor Svevo wants life to remain imperfect. In this respect one is constrained to regard the universal suicide in Svevo's famous last chapter of La coscienza di Zeno as being the only solution for a better life. For Svevo, while life in its present guise, is the only life we know, it has to be accepted with understanding. Michelstaedter's idealisation of life is very much on a theoretical level, in that he does not make provision in his thought for tolerating imperfection on an indefinite basis. Rather, he sees grief and suffering and pain as challenges to the "uomo della persuasione", which challenges the latter must overcome in order to become "persuaso":

"Solo nel deserto egli vive un' vertiginosa vastità e profondità di vita ...[F]inché egli *faccia di sé stesso fiamma* . . . [A]vrà nella persuasione la pace." [Stresses Michelstaedter's.]²⁶

[Alone in the desert he lives a vertiginous vastness and depth of life ... {U}ntil such time that he *makes of himself a flame* . . . [H]e will have peace in conviction ["persuasione"].]

Michelstaedter uses Christ²⁷ as an example of someone who first had to save Himself before he could save others. The individual likewise, must first save himself and cannot expect salvation from others, least of all a deity in the sense of a deity either as an extension of the human mind, or a god in the mythological sense of the word. The emphasis in that instance is on the exemplary task that Christ represented and fulfilled, and that he explored His own depths. In doing so, Christ became a teacher of, and example to, others; He overcame his own frailties as a human being; and His view that it is better to give than to receive, demonstrates the degree to which man should overcome himself, and give of himself for his neighbour' sake, and not live merely to receive. Michelstaedter points out that Christ saved Himself and Michelstaedter also says that in life one must give and not ask.²⁸ Thus, by asserting that Christ saved Himself, and in postulating that in life one must give, and not ask anything, Michelstaedter comes very close to an interpretation of life, which although not postulating that Christ is the Saviour, is one that recognises the qualities that Christ had and that those qualities embody an ideal which man can only strive towards.

Albert Camus, in the following passage, places in relief the various issues one is dealing with here, namely, Michelstaedter's view that man must make of himself a kind of Christ; that Christ is an *exemplum* and an ideal. The question then turns in upon itself and assumes another aspect or facet: Is that which man requires necessarily in accordance with that which Michelstaedter proposes, i.e., "l'uomo della persuasione", an ideal to strive for, an ideal to emulate.

"Christianity believes that it is fighting against nihilism because it gives the world a sense

of direction, while it is nihilist itself insofar as it prevents, in imposing an imaginary meaning on life, the discovery of its real meaning."²⁹

With this in mind then, we see that Svevo and Michelstaedter do offer us two interesting alternatives. Neither of these alternatives is thoroughly Christian, though Michelstaedter strives for a simulacrum of Christ in his "uomo della persuasione". Michelstaedter is not "nihilist" - in the sense of its use above - inasmuch as he does recognise the "illusions" that buttress life and give meaning to life, conventionally speaking - "illusions" though perhaps facile, such as concepts of God, patriotism, the family, etc., which he sees as all being devices which alienate man from himself, from the solitude of his destiny and from his becoming like Christ, acquiring "salute" and thus becoming a "uomo della persuasione". The "rettorica" in life impedes "persuasione". Michelstaedter takes Christianity at face value and does not accept the structures, and contrived notions of significance and worth that have been built up around Christianity. Taking this further, though, he, undermines, in effect, the very civilisation that is built upon Christian values which in themselves have been abused over centuries and have little to do with the figure of Christ himself. In this respect, Michelstaedter seems to see himself, therefore, as one in the process of "rediscovering" or "adapting" the qualities that Christ had. He is advocating a return to a state of pristine innocence, a return to the origins of the culture of Western man, prior to Christianity and its subsequent distortion.

Svevo, on the other hand, is nihilistic perhaps to a lesser degree in that he does not impose an "imaginary meaning on life" to use Camus' term. But for that matter, neither does Michelstaedter truly impose an imaginary meaning on life. Rather, Michelstaedter provides a code of conduct, an example to which one should aspire, which is hardly the equivalent of imposing an imaginary meaning on life. The "uomo della persuasione" finds meaning within himself, for himself and in his own terms. The "uomo della persuasione" requires no external contrivance with which to endow his life with meaning or significance.

Just like Svevo, Michelstaedter is fully aware of the shortcomings of life. Neither he nor Svevo refers to artificial paradigms or metaphysical solace in order to derive meaning from life. They do, however, apply certain criteria which enable them to rigorously evaluate themselves. This is true in no small measure because of Svevo's adherence to Darwin and Schopenhauer, and Michelstaedter's preference for the pre-Socratic philosophers, Nietzsche and Ibsen. It should be noted that the sources to whom Michelstaedter and Svevo turn respectively, are all sources which investigate life as it is; the phenomenon of life. They are minds which attempt to understand life, whether it has some meaning or no meaning whatsoever. In this respect we can thus see that as far as "systems of belief" are concerned, Michelstaedter and Svevo are very much akin to one another. But Michelstaedter foresees a private hell, again in his unique, highly specific terms, for those who deviate from the "via della persuasione". He says:

"... [P]oiché per la paura della morte s'accontentano di vivere senza persuasione; ogni loro atto, ogni loro parola è ingiustizia, è disonestà, che è sempre l'affermazione d'un'individualità illusoria."³⁰

[... [H]ence, because of the fear of death, they are content to live without conviction ["persuasione"]; their every act, their every word, [amounts to] injustice and dishonesty which is always the affirmation of an illusory individuality.]

Michelstaedter here elucidates the idea of an illusory individuality, of a manifestly false security by implication, and this would be the hell that "rettorica" holds for anyone not intent upon "persuasione". This is not unlike the Christian concept of damnation which awaits him who cannot live by Christ's principles. By Michelstaedter's definition, the individual in his sense of the word is his "uomo della persuasione". Having established that the "uomo della persuasione" is at best an ideal, the very concept of individuality comes into question.

In examining the concept or notion of individuality we see how Svevo's Zeno demonstrates

how illusory individuality can be. Zeno simply cannot act of his own free will. His neurosis and his search for health dominate him and force him into "doing things". He is the prime example of a "regressed individual" to use a term which Michelstaedter³¹ employs, viz., the individual has become as society has progressed. In fact, Svevo is saying the same thing as Michelstaedter by means of the former's protagonist, Zeno. Stated somewhat differently, Svevo asserts that modern man has become part of a mass and that the very concept of individuality has consequently become irrelevant and illusory.

We see then that once again Michelstaedter's and Svevo's preoccupations seem to merge in that they both identify and point out and describe the dissolution of the individual. The "uomo della rettorica" is modern man, whilst the "uomo della persuasione", or true individuality, if not a figment from the past, is a figment of the imagination, of idealism. As we have seen Michelstaedter advocates that the "uomo della persuasione" must create himself and the world. However, man, the "uomo della rettorica", has created the contemporary world and allowed "illusory individuality" to flourish. Both the "uomo della rettorica" and Zeno are representations of modern man and are, as such, responsible, albeit unwittingly so, for the accumulated disease and spiritual poverty that Svevo and Michelstaedter identified around them.

The following passage by Svevo is significant in that it illustrates a sage and unidealistic view of life. There is a benign and undeluded tone in what he says. More significantly, he identifies the dilemma of youth, which is Michelstaedter's dilemma, and describes the very things that the "uomo della persuasione" would seek to overcome, namely the constrictions of time, space and environment. The very things Michelstaedter rejects, he Svevo, acknowledges and displays a sanguine respect for the inevitable. Here Svevo differs profoundly in his views with Michelstaedter, but again, both Svevo and Michelstaedter take issue with the same problem, and in this case an attitude pertaining to existence:

"E la gioventù cosciente quando muore soffre orribilmente. La vita da lontano è amore, gloria, godimento e tutto si perde per un insignificante accidente che poi talvolta sfugge . . . [N]oi [gli anziani] intanto procediamo nella vita di catastrofe in catastrofe. Nel mezzo del cammin . . . dormiamo i nostri sonni su illusioni distrutte, desideri dimenticati, rinunzie in seguito a costrizioni imperiose dell'ambiente delle persone e del tempo." [Brackets mine]³²

[And youth {which is aware} suffers terribly when it dies. From a distance life is love, glory and enjoyment and everything is lost because of an insignificant accident which at times is fleeting . . . [W]e [the elderly] proceed through life in the meantime from catastrophe to catastrophe. In the midway of our path . . . we sleep {our state of} somnolence {based on} destroyed illusions, forgotten desires and renunciations resulting from imperious constrictions caused by the environment of people and time.]

Here Svevo is enunciating the antithesis of "persuasione", that view which would seek to deny dependence of that which surrounds the individual. "Persuasione" seeks to elevate man, to induce him to "abandonare la terra", "to abandon the earth", in short, not to accept what is prescribed by society. As such "persuasione", in fact, serves to reinforce Svevo's point, viz., that a life of moral integrity is hardly humanly possible. This fact Zeno exemplifies.

Furthermore, when we recall Camus' view of nihilism,³³ it can be said that Michelstaedter falls squarely within the ambit of nihilism to the extent that he is not able to believe in what is, to accept what is happening, or to live life as it is "offered", defined and ordered by society. Camus maintains that "this infirmity is at the root of all idealism"² and he regards nihilism as being the reverse side of the coin of idealism precisely because idealism does not wish or tend to see life as it is, but prefers to see life as it would like it to be or ought to be. Michelstaedter, however, goes beyond simple idealism, because his particular, specific idealism is not an ideology that Michelstaedter wishes to impose on everyone. He states consistently and unequivocally that the road to "salute" is not traversed by everyone. Michelstaedter, as we have seen, is élitist, though what he says patently has implications beyond himself. He also discusses at length, albeit disparagingly, "la rettorica". He creates

two alternatives and leaves no doubt that the one that consists of greater integrity is obviously "persuasion".

Where Michelstaedter goes beyond the mere realm of common idealism, is when he requires the individual to be virtually Christ-like and to not adhere to the authority that is passed down from society, which society in turn, justifies its actions by claiming to be Christian. For Michelstaedter, it would seem that Christian principles, or any other all-embracing view of life for that matter, become adulterated and seem to metamorphose when they are filtered into secular or societal "authority" or become norms of behaviour, uncritically adopted. His is an idealism which is intensely personal and emphasises his own alienated state as an individual, as well as his profound contempt for society, and more specifically, for the bourgeoisie of his time.

We have seen though, that Svevo's thinking, by contrast, allows for the kind of extremist thinking, at times deluded and egotistical of which a youth, such as Michelstaedter might be capable.³⁴ The contrast between Michelstaedter and Svevo is most pronounced in the following passage:

"E tuttavia ricominciamo accatastando ancora vita sulla morte credendo di avere l'esperienza mentre non la si ha che quando è finita . . . [E] di disillusione in disillusione si va alla vecchiaia."³⁵

[And nonetheless we start again still heaping life on death believing to have experience while [when in fact] one does not have [experience] until [such time] as it is completed . . . [A]nd from disillusion to disillusion one goes into old age.]

When Svevo assays that we go into old age from one disillusionment to another, he is surely stating something which is fundamentally true for himself, possibly something which may indeed be a universal truth. But what is even more significant is Svevo's resounding capacity to identify, isolate, and express the inevitability of disillusionment in life, and the

crumbling and evanescence of ideals and hopes. This is all the more telling precisely because it helps us to understand the extent to which Michelstaedter, on a psychological level, could not cope with the reality of human existence and therefore had to create his own very specific reality encapsulated, as in fact it was, by rigid logic and a system of thought that reduced life to nothingness. And this in order to enable the individual to reconstruct life anew for himself.

Both points of view, Svevo's and Michelstaedter's, seem plausible and valid. The difference between the two is that Svevo's view of life is based more on experience than on theory, more on close observation of life than on a hankering after perfection. The statement by Svevo immediately above, also echoes his own sentiment that life is unheroic. Moreover, it is an "antidotal compensation", as it were, to Michelstaedter's formulation of a personal *Weltanschauung* based on a synthesis of the individual and his ideals.

Whilst comparing the respective "definitions" of life of the two authors, we find that they concur on another vital point. Michelstaedter says:

"La vita è una grandezza irriducibile."³⁶

[Life is an irreducible grandeur.] [The vastness of life cannot be diminished.]

When comparing this to what Svevo says one notes a remarkable similarity:

"La vita non è né brutta né bella, ma è originale . . . [M]a più che ci pensavo, più originale trovavo la vita."³⁷

[Life is neither ugly nor beautiful, but it is original . . . [B]ut the more I thought about it, the more original I found life [to be].]

Svevo's statement is in complete harmony with Michelstaedter's. Svevo does not reduce

life to being beautiful or ugly, but merely original. Life merely *is*. He does not attribute any extrinsic value to it, nor does he judge it in terms of an ethical code. He views life as a phenomenon, unconstructed and unconstructable. It is curious that Michelstaedter should hold a similar view in this regard. Michelstaedter calls life a "grandezza" - but beyond that abstract noun, he does not "load" the statement in any way by referring to some pre-established or normative ethical code. Life, whether lived as "persuasione" or "rettorica", is still life. In Svevo life as lived in "malattia" or "salute", (despite the fact that "salute" does not exist), is after all, life, and does not cease being life. Michelstaedter's suicide does not alter his conviction that "la vita è una grandezza irriducibile". The critical point is that both authors aver that life as an experience cannot be known until it is over. Moreover, Svevo's concluding chapter in *La coscienza di Zeno*, in which he proffers the hope of a world without parasites and disease, is effectively the expression of a hope for a better world, a better life. Likewise, Michelstaedter's suicide is the culmination, the final expression of having gleaned from life what he could, and for him the ultimate intensity of life resides in the moment of death. Both authors, therefore, have what one could call a positive attitude to life, but decidedly not positive in terms of the form that human life has acquired through civilisation. They both display an appreciation of the essence and reject the manifestations of life that deny the essence of life, the form that contorts life and removes it from its origins and obfuscate and undermine that which impedes a conscious experience of the essence of life, of the "autenticità dell'essere", of the "authenticity of being". Thus their respective intellectual and philosophical approaches to this view of life may differ in form, but the substance of their convictions and their premises arrive at a peculiar consonance.

Obviously, this positive note derives from a patently tortuous philosophical "route", both in Michelstaedter and in Svevo. For Svevo, liberty is arrived at by a continual process of elimination. Everything is illusory. Thus, Svevo holds that from disillusionment to disillusionment one approaches old age. As one approaches the end of life, one glean a

more mature comprehension of its deeper meanings. The "authenticity of being" thus acquired, is the indispensable prerequisite, the preparatory *sine qua non* which then leads to the liberty of the individual. Thus, we have seen how existence itself has been treated by both writers. To summarize concisely, Michelstaedter tends to impose his idealism on life, though not rejecting life itself, and this in spite of his own suicide. Svevo, confronting the same issues, shares the same preoccupations and ponders the same questions, but views the individual as a product of society and civilisation and not, as does Michelstaedter, the quintessential protagonist.

CONCLUSION

As we have mentioned in Chapter Two, both Michelstaedter and Svevo show a deep scepticism in regard to knowledge *per se*. In Svevo's novel! La coscienza di Zeno, he uses psychoanalysis for many reasons. But the one that is pertinent to our discussion, is its use or manifestation as a means to acquire health - "salute". As we have indicated, the search for a cure is as much a symptom of disease as the disease itself. Psychoanalysis is parodied in La coscienza di Zeno as much as man is parodied. The very implementation of therapy and the ethical confidentiality it presupposes become a ludicrous masquerade, a grotesque parody inasmuch as Dr S. publishes the confessions of Zeno, his patient. By giving the novel the title "La coscienza" - meaning the consciousness or the conscience of Zeno, Svevo is accentuating yet again how illusory the concept of individuality is. Zeno's confessions are perforce mendacious. That is to say, the individual will reveal only what he chooses to reveal. And if Zeno's confessions reveal the neurotic and pusillanimous nature of modern man, the "uomo della retorica", then what is not revealed assumes critical importance and places into sharper perspective the nature and scope of that which is revealed. The confessions, of course, also illumine Zeno's inherent disease. Here Svevo comes close to a Pirandellian view of life, viz., that man is not what he believes himself to be, nor what others perceive him to be. His "being" is an entirely subjective experience, both to himself and to others, for there is in fact no objective reality. What Zeno does not reveal of himself implies that what he is in fact can never be known, either to himself or to anyone else. Zeno "is", and that is all that one can know. He is "originale" with or without his ailments and/or neuroses, and his confessions reveal only a part of him.

In Michelstaedter, we have seen how the individual "triumphs", and this poses two main questions. The first question is: Is Michelstaedter's individual, his "uomo della

persuasione", also illusory or is he "valid" despite or indeed because of the view that the individual is so preconditioned that individuality as such becomes a misnomer and the individual is in effect merely what his subjectivity dictates? In other words, is the "uomo della persuasione" illusory in the sense of being a fiction created by an idealistic or ideological imagination, or does he have any validity in terms of objective verification and evaluation grounded in reality? The second question arises from the afore-mentioned considerations: Does knowledge as such have any validity? Michelstaedter, like Pirandello, casts serious doubt on the validity of knowledge *in se* and *per se*. Svevo too casts doubt upon this, but more by implication than by explicit assertion, even though Zeno's obsession with dates and time indicates the irrelevance with which he views so-called objective facts. Objectivity and/or objective reality are, like individuality, simply inconsequential or superfluous to Zeno. His illness and/or his reality, are completely subjective. Michelstaedter overcomes the question of subjective knowledge in that "l'uomo della persuasione" is supposed to have the capacity to transcend his own subjectivity:

"Eppure se 'oggettività' vuol dire 'oggettività', veder oggettivamente o non ha senso perché deve aver un *soggetto* o è l'estrema coscienza di chi è *uno colle cose*, ha in sé tutte le cose: [uno indivisibile], il persuaso: il dio." [Stresses Michelstaedter's and brackets in the text indicate Carr pailla's translation of Michelstaedter's original quotation from the Greek taken from Parmenides.]³⁸

[And yet if 'objectivity' means 'objectivity', [i.e.] to see objectively, either has no sense because it must have a *subject* or it is the extreme consciousness of whoever is *one with the things* [is at one with all that is around him], *has* within him everything: [one indivisible being], the [man of] conviction: the god.]

Michelstaedter implies here that the "l'uomo della persuasione" must absorb both objective and subjective knowledge and be one with the world. As he says, "A ognuno il suo mondo è il mondo,"³⁹ "to each, his world is *the* world". The "uomo della persuasione" must conquer the world around him and conquer both objective reality and subjective reality. Or to put it differently in Michelstaedter's own words : "Poiché quest'uomo gli deve essere tutto il mondo",⁴⁰ "Since for this man the world must be everything". In other words, the world

functions as something to which he "l'uomo della persuasione" must constantly say "no", until such time as he has acquired the ability to fill the void and illumine the darkness by himself.⁴¹ [. . . [F]inché egli non abbia da sé riempito il deserto e illuminata l'oscurità] The barrier between subjectivity and objectivity must cease to exist, it must be overcome. It is in this vein that he denigrates science and comes very close to Svevo's sceptical view of science and sees those who pursue "knowledge" as being fraudulent in that they perpetuate the notion of the world being objectifiable and hence maintain and enforce a barrier between subjectivity and objectivity. The scientists, in short, provide the "uomo della retorica" with the moral justification for his pursuit of material well-being and in so doing buttress an immoral world:

"Infatti gli scienziati nelle loro esperienze la cecità degli occhi, la sordità delle orecchie, l'ottusità d'ogni loro senso sperimentano . . . [A] rendere più *intensa* questa ottusa vita autonoma dei sensi la scienza moltiplica la loro potenza con ingegnosi apparati." [Michelstaedter's stresses.]⁴²

[In fact the scientists in their experiences [,] the blindness of the eyes, the deafness of the ears, experiment [with the] obtuseness of their every sense . . . [T]o render this obtuse life more *intense* this obtuse autonomous life of the senses [,] science multiplies its power with ingenious apparatus.]

Svevo in this regard says the following:

"La bestia nuova [l'uomo] era nata e le sue membra invece che perfezionarsi quali ordigni divennero capaci di maneggiare quelli che essa [la bestia] creò . . . così l'uomo benché sempre torvo e malcontento si riproduce uguale per poter maneggiare gli ordigni che s'erano cristallizzati. E così nacquero i grandi popoli perché grandi sono quei popoli che hanno gli ordigni migliori in grande quantità.

Alcuni di questi ordigni erano idee." [Brackets mine]⁴³

[The new animal [man] was born and his limbs, rather than perfecting themselves as instruments, became capable of handling that which he [the animal] created . . . thus man, even though he was always surly and unhappy, reproduced himself in the same fashion in order to be able to handle the instruments that had become crystallised. Thus in this way the great peoples were born because great are those peoples that have better instruments in large quantity.

Some of these instruments were ideas.]

In comparing these two passages, we note that Michelstaedter is specifically referring to scientists, but like Svevo, he accuses science of creating "ingegnosi apparati" which, in Svevo's terms, are called "ordigni". They both pour scorn on science inasmuch as science claims to be objective. But to both writers, science is quite the contrary, for it creates a veil over reality, a veil with empirical claims to veracity, but which claims, nonetheless prevent man from seeing things as they truly are. And in Michelstaedter's case, these claims of science become the crutch for the "uomo della retorica". Stated differently, the "uomo della retorica" 's belief in them and/or a reliance upon them, cripples and blinds the him. In Svevo's view science becomes the deceptive means by which Zeno can acquire ostensible health. Science becomes the tool of "rettorica", the justification for man's faith in mere technical progress but which progress is not accompanied by moral progress.

Svevo sees man as being the victim of what he, man himself, has created, while Michelstaedter does not elaborate upon man's dependence on technology. Svevo, in fact, in maintaining that some of man's tools or instruments are ideas, leads us to the thought that Michelstaedter, in being a propounder of ideas, is very much the victim of ideas which strive or purport to define the perfect human being. Svevo sees ideas as being impositions of life, impositions which can ultimately destroy life, and in this he contrasts sharply with Michelstaedter who views ideas as man's salvation (or the individual's salvation) provided these ideas are exercised through concerted effort and willpower. Jeuland-Meynaud points out⁴⁴ how Michelstaedter ensconces himself in a carapace consisting of a world of logic and ideas which are a manifestation of Michelstaedter's inability to cope with life as it presents itself to him.

Michelstaedter's invective against science is also aimed at refuting the idea of objectivity because he, like Svevo, maintains that objectivity is illusory. He does not seem, however, to

be able to take the next step, namely, that of acknowledging the illusory nature of individuality as far as the "uomo della persuasione" is concerned. He does precisely this, however, in regard to the "uomo della rettorica". Again, his "uomo della persuasione" is required to overcome false securities and false ideas of individuality in order to arrive at a true knowledge, a true security and a true individuality. In fact, Michelstaedter's idea of "persuasione" can be seen against the background of a pervasive erosion of the individual, which erosion he cannot accept and which Svevo, by contrast, accepts, albeit with resignation and caustic irony. Michelstaedter feels the need to overcome this pervasive erosion of the individual in order to arrive at the all-embracing individual, his "uomo della persuasione".

Michelstaedter sees "rettorica" as flourishing because of science:

"Così fiorisce la rettorica accanto alla vita. Gli uomini si mettono in posizione conoscitiva e fanno il sapere."⁴⁵

[Thus rhetoric flourishes alongside life. Men put themselves in a cognitive position and make knowledge.]

Knowledge is seen by Michelstaedter as buttressing "rettorica" because it is knowledge perpetuated in order to maintain a false consciousness, a false security, with its purpose being to impose an inchoate "meaning" on life, a meaning that life does not have intrinsically, in short, a rhetorical meaning rather than one stemming from persuasion and conviction. Man, as far as Michelstaedter is concerned, must do what he does, live as he lives, out of personal conviction, and must not accept perceived ways whether these ways be the tenets of Christianity or the pre-digested systems of thought such as science provides.

Svevo's view of psychoanalysis is similar in that psychoanalysis maintains the illusion of the possibility of health and perfectibility. Science is fraudulent or, more specifically,

psychoanalysis is fraudulent, because its objective is to make the individual who is out of kilter with society, adapt to society, - as was precisely the case with Zeno. This attempt, through psychoanalysis, to adapt to a distorted society is even more diseased than the patient himself, since the patient is, after all, the product of that society.

In other words, psychoanalysis and its attempt to adapt the individual to the dictates of society, is thereby and therein an "ordigno", a tool or instrument of society, serving society and wielded by society and not by the individual. To carry the thought even further, psychoanalysis can, by extension, readily assume the proportions of a societal religion or opiate to constrict individual thought and independence of behaviour and action. Thus, according to Svevo, it is not the patient who needs the cure. On the contrary, it is society itself. Psychoanalysis is merely society's instrument to bring about the re-integration of disease on an individual level into disease on a societal level. Therefore, in Svevo's terms, psychoanalysis is highly suspect. Hence it follows that his novel La coscienza di Zeno, is as much a parody of psychoanalysis, as it is of man, as it is of society, and as it is of Western Civilisation.

Then, too, Svevo sees clearly that man's course is leading him to disaster. It is that selfsame premonition of disaster that hung over a generation prior to World War I, and Michelstaedter's "uomo della retorica" is the telling description of the sort of person, i.e., the inert, insensitive and typical bourgeois, in whose interest the war was fought - the Guido Speiers of this world. Might not Michelstaedter's following words be roughly equivalent to Svevo's premonition of a universal suicide, when he, Michelstaedter, says in reference to the "uomo della retorica", ". . . [L]a loro vita è il suicidio", "*their life is suicide*"?⁴⁶

In summation, then, we see how Michelstaedter's and Svevo's views coincide, or at the very least, bear strong and arresting similarities in many essential respects. Each wishes to arrive at liberty and authenticity. Each perceives the crisis of modern man. Michelstaedter's youthful idealism, his not having had the experience of a fuller, more extended life, and his not having allowed himself this, results in his seeking a solution in ideas. Svevo, on the other hand, having had the experience of a longer life, perceives a possible, tenuous "solution" or better, "resolution", in "accommodations" to life expressed by narrative form. However, these "accommodations" are profoundly tempered by experience and scepticism, both stemming from his close observation of man. Zeno is a much more telling portrayal of modern man than Michelstaedter's "uomo della rettorica" in that Michelstaedter lists, albeit in a very penetrating fashion, the ills of modern man. But Svevo's analysis of modern man is more arresting and more incisive because he is a novelist rather than a theoretician. Michelstaedter's main instrument is logic whereas Svevo's is the narrative and the latter, perforce gives Svevo much greater scope for expression. They do, however, each in his own way, pose an implicit question as to how life, in order to be worthy of itself, should be lived. And the answer, perhaps, may be found in that Michelstaedter has a canvas with two straight lines intersecting at right angles, one vertical, representing "l'uomo della persuasione" and one horizontal, representing "l'uomo della rettorica". Whereas Svevo does not limit his canvas, he uses all of it, nor does he limit his expression to the contrived intersection of two lines only. He explores all the angles, not just the right angles. And yet by observing and contemplating the canvas of the one, one's comprehension of the other can only be enhanced.

- ¹Camus, Albert, The Myth of Sisyphus. Tr. Justin O'Brien, Penguin Bks., (Penguin Modern Classics), Harmondsworth, 1955, p. 105.
- ²Michelstaedter, Carlo, Opere, Sansoni, Firenze, 1958, p. 825.
- ³Svevo, Italo, Opera Omnia. Dall'Oglio, Milano, 1966, p. 646.
- ⁴Camus, A., ibid. p. 53.
- ⁵Michelstaedter, Carlo, La persuasione e la retorica, Adelphi, Milano, 1982, p. 70.
- ⁶Svevo, I., op.cit. p. 645.
- ⁷Michelstaedter, C., Opere, p. 825.
- ⁸Michelstaedter, C., La persuasione e la retorica, p. 71.
- ⁹Ibid. p. 70.
- ¹⁰Vide: Borghello, Giampaolo, La coscienza borghese. Saggio sulla narrativa di Svevo, Savelli, Roma, 1977. Ghidetti, Enrico, Italo Svevo. La coscienza di un borghese triestino. Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1980. Maxia, Sandro, Lettura di Italo Svevo, Liviana Editrice, Padova, 1971. Vide present bibliography.
- ¹¹Svevo, I., op.cit. p. 645.
- ¹²Michelstaedter, C., La persuasione e la retorica, p. 144.
- ¹³Ibid. p. 73.
- ¹⁴Cerruti, Marco, Carlo Michelstaedter, Mursia, Milano, 1967, p. 135.
- ¹⁵Raschini, Maria Adelaide, Carlo Michelstaedter, Marzorati, Milano, 1965, pp. 11, 17, 79, et passim.
- ¹⁶Moretti-Costanzi Teodorico, "Un esistenzialista *ante litteram*: Carlo Michelstaedter". In vol.: Esistenzialismo: saggi e studi, a cura di L. Pelloux, Roma, 1943, pp. 159-172.
- ¹⁷Cattaneo Giulio, "La rivolta impossibile di Carlo Michelstaedter". In: Avanti!, no. 37, (gennaio 1957,) pp. 85-92, (ristampato col titolo: "Michelstaedter" in Esperienze intellettuali del primo Novecento, Milano, Mondadori, 1968, pp.13-29.)
- ¹⁸Campailla, Sergio, Parola e pensiero di Carlo Michelstaedter, Patron Editore, Bologna, 1974, pp. 137-140, 143 et passim.
- ¹⁹Michelstaedter, Carlo, Poesie, Adelphi, Milano, 1987, p. 54.
- ²⁰Michelstaedter, C., La persuasione e la retorica, p. 71.
- ²¹Michelstaedter, C., ibid. p. 83.
- ²²Camus, A., op.cit. p. 97.

²³Michelstaedter, C., La persuasione e la rettorica, p. 87.

²⁴Ibid., p. 53.

²⁵Ibid., p. 88.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., p. 103.

²⁸Ibid., p. 82.

²⁹Camus, Albert, The Rebel. Tr. Justin O'Brien, Penguin Bks., (Penguin Modern Classics), Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 59.

³⁰Michelstaedter, C., La persuasione e la rettorica, p. 78.

³¹Ibid., p. 156.

³²Svevo, I., op.cit., p. 647.

³³Camus, A., ibid., p. 59.

³⁴Svevo, I., ibid., p. 647.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Michelstaedter, C., La persuasione e la rettorica, p. 143.

³⁷Svevo, Italo, La coscienza di Zeno, Dall'Oglio, Milano, 1966, p. 368.

³⁸Michelstaedter, C., La persuasione e la rettorica, p. 122.

³⁹Ibid., p. 53.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 84.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., p. 127.

⁴³Svevo, I., Opera Omnia, p. 642.

⁴⁴Jeuland-Meynaud, Maryse, "Mourir d'écrire: Reflexions sur un epistolaire" in Cahiers d'études romans, no 9, Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, 1984, p. 100.

⁴⁵Michelstaedter, C., La persuasione e la rettorica, p. 100.

⁴⁶Michelstaedter, C., ibid., p. 40.

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